
IDA'S SECRET
AGNES GIBERNE.

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"Mervyn! Is it really?" said Ida, in a bewildered sort of way."—*p.* 28.

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IDA'S SECRET;

OR,

THE TOWERS OF ICKLEDALE.

BY

AGNES GIBERNE,

AUTHOR OF

"FLOSS SILVERTHORN;" "HIS ADOPTED DAUGHTER;" "WON AT LAST;"
ETC. ETC.

NEW EDITION.

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
HOW THE TWO CAME BACK	9
CHAPTER II.	
HOW JEM FINDS SOMETHING UNEXPECTED	17
CHAPTER III.	
HOW MERVYN WAS RECEIVED	25
CHAPTER IV.	
HOW THINGS CAME ABOUT ORIGINALLY	33
CHAPTER V.	
JEM GETS SOMETHING COOLING	42
CHAPTER VI.	
MR. MARCHMONT EXPLAINS SOMEWHAT	48
CHAPTER VII.	
IDA HAS A CERTAIN DESIRE	55
CHAPTER VIII.	
JEM ALSO HAS A PARTICULAR WISH	62
CHAPTER IX.	
WIDOW TOWERS ENLARGES UPON THE PAST	69
CHAPTER X.	
MERVYN ENDEAVOURS TO MEND CHINA	81
CHAPTER XI.	
IDA AND MERVYN HOLD CONFIDENTIAL TALK	89
CHAPTER XII.	
HICKS COMES TO GRIEF	96

PAGE

CHAPTER XIII.
CHERRY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK . . . 104

CHAPTER XIV.
MERVYN LEARNS THE IMPORTANCE OF A CERTAIN VIRTUE 113

CHAPTER XV.
IDA'S SECRET SEEMS NEAR DISCLOSURE . . . 121

CHAPTER XVI.
BUT STOPS SHORT OF THAT POINT! . 128

CHAPTER XVII.
MRS. TOWERS GETS A GLIMPSE BELOW THE SURFACE . 135

CHAPTER XVIII.
SOMETHING OF A STORM INDOORS FOLLOWS THAT WITHOUT 142

CHAPTER XIX.
MERVYN MAKES AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE . . 149

CHAPTER XX.
MR. MARCHMONT DOESN'T WANT TO BE RICH . . 158

CHAPTER XXI.
AN OLD MAN SHOWS THE STRENGTH OF HIS GOLDEN FETTERS 164

CHAPTER XXII.
JEM GETS NO NEARER HOME THAN THE GARDEN . 170

CHAPTER XXIII.
BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL 176

CHAPTER XXIV.
MERVYN IS ROUSED TO ACTION 183

CHAPTER XXV.
THINGS SEEM GETTING CLEAR 191

CHAPTER XXVI.
"THE MONEY AND BURDEN" 198

CHAPTER XXVII.
ALL IS NOT YET SETTLED 204

CHAPTER XXVIII.
SOMEBODY HAS HIS WISH—OR HERS! . . . 214

IDA'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

HOW THE TWO CAME BACK.

"COLLINS——"

"Sir!"

"What sort of a reception shall we have?"

"I'm pretty sure about mine, sir."

"Are you? I wish I could say the same about mine."

"Well, sir, one may as well expect the best," said Jem Collins, a smile breaking over his handsome bronzed features.

"May one? Expect, only to be disappointed? Not I! Collins, I declare I half wish I could exchange with you."

It was a good many years ago that this slight

dialogue took place. The two young men were leaning against a stile, with the air of well-wearied pedestrians. There were certain points of resemblance, yet many points of stronger non-resemblance, between them. Each might have numbered some eight or nine-and-twenty summers; and if the grey travelling suit of the one was coarse and weather-stained, that of the other could boast little in the way of superiority. There was a certain half-foreign air about them both, though at the same time—this may be a contradiction in terms, but not in fact—an English air. Each carried a small well-packed leather bag, and wore a rough knapsack.

Beyond them lay a long reach of dusty-white high-road, stretching due east and west, and vanishing into two distances with scarcely a bend intervening. The stile led into a sharply-descending field, beyond which lay a wide valley, bounded on the northern, eastern, and western sides by luxuriant hills of varying height. The village or, more correctly, the small country town of Ickledale occupied this same valley; the houses and cottages clustering thickly towards the north-east of where the young men stood, but being more scattered in the outskirts. The highroad, which they were about to leave, might be said to form the southern boundary of the place.

Rather more to the north-west of their post of observation, slightly apart from Ickledale, but within the valley, and beneath the very brow of the highest hill, was dimly visible in the twilight a certain old

pile of building, half-buried amid surrounding trees, but with curious little towers and gable-ends peeping up through the foliage. And while the gaze of James Collins was persistently bent towards the town proper, the gaze of his companion was as studiously directed towards this last-named place.

The travellers had advanced from the west. Somewhat farther on, as they were well aware, a road branched off from that by which they had hitherto approached, leading in a northerly direction straight to Ickledale, then sweeping round in a curve to the west as the old village High Street, till the said building amongst trees was reached. But the short field-cut was preferable to the tired walkers.

Of the two companions, James Collins was decidedly the more athletic in build, and the more strictly handsome in appearance. He was rather an unusually fine specimen of English manhood—strong yet light-footed, with a sensible face, not wanting in shrewdness and humour. Mervyn Stanhope, on the contrary, was spare even to slightness, with features thin and aquiline, complexion pale though sunburnt, lips nervous yet resolute, and a pair of half-sad blue eyes beneath a prominent brow.

"It will be dark before either of us gets home," suggested Collins, with some desire to proceed.

"Just what I wish," responded the other. "If I am to find myself once for all a homeless wanderer, I would rather face the fact in darkness."

"Well, sir, you know what you've promised," said Collins. "Not as I 've any real fear for the upshot; but if there *is* any difficulty to-night with the old gentleman, you 'll come off straight to my home."

Mervyn hardly seemed to hear the words. He was gazing hard, with contracted forehead.

"I say, Collins, you see the highest gable to the right. Do you remember our adventure there together?"

"I just think I do, sir."

"It wasn't the first time you saved me from something worse than a broken limb. How angry my grandfather was, to be sure! And how angry I was, too, at his non-appreciation of your heroism!"

"Well, sir, you were a bit hot in those days," said Collins quietly.

"If I had not been—a considerable bit, by-the-bye—you and I might have been living in Ickledale all these long years past. What say you, Collins? Would you wish it?"

"Would you, sir?"

"Yourself all over," said Mervyn, with a restless smile. "I wish I had a little of your caution. Answer my question first."

"Sir, our going was altogether wrong," said Collins steadily. "And it don't seem to me that God's blessing has been upon it."

But Mervyn attempted no answer to the return question. He sprang suddenly over the stile.

"Well, it 's of no use to delay. If we must go on,

we must. I wish you had never persuaded me to come home at all."

They went down the field in silence—Stanhope heavily, while Collins still walked briskly. Beyond a second stile at the bottom of the field, two lanes branched off—one to the north-east and the other to the north-west.

"Here we part for half an hour," said Stanhope moodily. "Go and prepare your friends for a speedy interloper."

"I might as much call myself an interloper as you, sir. My father will see you gladly enough, if you come, and mother too. But I hope you won't have to come."

"Mother!—ah!" groaned Stanhope. "If I had a mother awaiting me!"

"But you have a sister, Mr. Mervyn," said Collins gently.

"Ay, the child whom I plagued till her life was a burden to her. Well, it's a comfort I have *one* faithful friend in the world," muttered Stanhope, wringing the hand of Jem Collins. "You've stuck to me through everything. I say, Collins, I don't know that I have much faith in my own prayers, but I have in yours. You'll think of me."

"And pray for you, sir."

"All right."

He turned half away, as if a little ashamed of his own words.

"About the second bag, sir," said Collins, heaving it

lightly up with one hand. "Shall I keep it till the morning, or bring it to the Towers to-night?"

"What's in it? Oh, ay, books and papers. They're safer in your charge than mine. I should lose some, to a certainty. No, don't come to-night. I'm more likely to come to you."

"Good-night, then, sir."

"I say, Collins, you and I are an odd pair of adventurers."

Collins shook his head with a little smile.

"Curiously alike in our position. Both of us been ten years absent. Both of us in happy ignorance as to our affectionate relatives' state of mind towards us; only you're more sanguine than I, and with reason. Both of us peculiarly light as to pocket."

"Yes, sir," interrupted Collins, aware that if Stanhope lapsed into a conversational vein they might stand for another half-hour. "But don't you think it's time we should go on?"

"And both of us having for our ultimate destination—the Towers!" pursued Stanhope. "*Ultimate*, mind! I to mine, and you to yours."

Jem Collins's bronzed cheek took a deeper tint than was usual.

"Well, sir, you are pleased to say so."

"Pretty Cherry Towers! eh, Collins? There now, I'm not going to tease, my best and most faithful of friends," added Stanhope, with one of his abrupt changes. "I wish you success with all my heart.

Good-night. I wish you and I were back again in Australia."

Jem Collins could not echo the wish. The two figures went in opposite directions through the dusk: one steadily and swiftly, the other lagging more and more with every step, till the walk became a stand-still.

"I'm done up completely. I can't face the old gentleman till I have had a rest," muttered Mervyn.

He sat down on a felled trunk; for this lane led round, and not through, the town. It was quiet here, as in the depth of the country. A blighted elm-tree stretched its bare arms over him, and the monotonous cricket-like song of the night-jar echoed softly through the air. A faint murmur of life—too low to be resolved into human tones—came from the dwellings of Ickledale, where sleep was claiming its empire.

Mervyn had no thought of yielding yet to its dominion. He rested his head on his hands, and gave free rein to memory

Scene after scene flashed through his mind, recalled by the familiar scenery. How well he remembered the last time he had trod this road!—ay, and the fiery scenes preceding: his own headstrong wilfulness, his grandfather's violent anger, his mother's distress, his sister's terror, and the faithful devotion of James Collins through all. What a singular tie there had been between them all these

years! Master and servant they might be in outward position, but they were verily friends in heart.

Mervyn's *mother!* Was it any wonder that, as he thought of *her*, his lips quivered, and more than one hot tear crept through his closed eyelids? for that mother, whose sweet pale face haunted him like a vision, he would never see again on earth.

CHAPTER II.

HOW JEM FINDS SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.



AMES COLLINS pressed steadily and swiftly on his way.

At first he was in absolute solitude; but soon he began to encounter occasional good folks of Ickledale strolling about in twos and threes to enjoy the late evening coolness. Also a beginning of scattered houses and cottages on either side gradually thickened into the outskirts of the little town; and presently he was traversing a narrow street, with quaint old-fashioned shops, and here and there great overhanging eaves, belonging to bygone days.

Many a glance of interest did Jem Collins cast right and left, though he stopped for nothing. Familiar names over shop-windows alternated with many that were new and strange. Passers-by looked curiously at him, and he looked curiously back at them. He recognised no familiar faces, however. After all, the dim twilight was unfavourable, and the

larger number of Ickledale inhabitants had retired within their houses; and the young companions of his boyish days would have grown out of all knowledge.

Still pressing onwards through the gathering darkness, James approached at length the north-eastern extremity of Ickledale. Houses here grew more scanty, and streets were once again replaced by cottages in little gardens, with fields intervening.

Jem Collins was not far from home—the dear old home! Yes, it had been a dear and a happy home to him once, though he had quitted it of his own free will, out of devotion to the old squire's grandson, and entirely against his parents' desire.

"But they 'll forgive me—I 'm sure they 'll forgive me now," muttered Collins. "Mother would never turn me from her door, nor father either, I do believe. I 'll tell them I see things different now. I wouldn't do it over again—no, that I wouldn't."

Presently he reached the old Gothic church, with ivy clustering round the pointed windows. Eager as he was to be at home, Collins could not resist a brief pause. He opened the little gate, and passed into the churchyard, and just at that moment the moon, which had risen behind a bank of clouds, shone forth in soft splendour.

"I could pretty nigh fancy I was a boy again, going after some mischief with master," thought James. "There 's that elm tree where he tumbled off and sprained his ankle. He always came off badly,

somehow. I'm afraid I had a deal to do with getting him into his messes. It seemed very hard to both of us that old Mr. Stanhope should be always trying to keep us apart; but I'm sure I don't wonder now. I couldn't have been an over-good companion for any boy, let alone master, who was quick enough to get into mischief without me to spur him on worse."

Wandering up the pebbly path, James came suddenly upon a flat tombstone, which had not been there in his early days. Somehow it attracted his attention. The pure whiteness of the marble, and the clearness of the black letters, invited him to read in the silver moonlight:—

"To the Memory of

Mary Alicia Stanhope,

Wife of the Late Capt. James Stanhope, R.N."

"Good evening, my friend," said a placid voice behind him.

Collins turned hastily. He recognised the newcomer in a moment—an elderly man, whose gentle face, with its lines of intense benevolence and of dreamy absorption, James had been wont to see in the pulpit, during his boyish days, Sunday after Sunday, from year's end to year's end.

"Mr. Marchmont! Sir——"

James's involuntary exclamation of pleasure made

Mr. Marchmont bestow upon him an equally involuntary hand-shake of welcome. Not that he was recognised. Mr. Marchmont was famous for forgetfulness of faces, and he had long ago given up asking people their names.

After one little puzzled glance, he evidently contented himself with the certainty that Collins was somebody whom he ought to know, though he didn't, and towards whom he had a right to be on friendly terms.

"You did not expect to see me here to-night, I suppose?"

"Well—no, sir, I didn't," said James, smiling. "But it's a real pleasure."

"It is not your habit to come often, eh? I don't remember seeing you here before."

"Not for over ten years, sir," said James.

"Indeed. Ah, then you used to live in Ickledale, once upon a time?"

"My name is James Collins, sir."

"Collins! Yes, to be sure," said Mr. Marchmont gently, with a vague endeavour to fix the name upon the right individual in his memory, which was as treacherous with regard to proper nouns as with regard to features. "Collins!—yes. I daresay you are glad to be at home again. And you are taking a look at the old place? This is a pleasant spot for quiet thought. I often come alone after dark."

"Do you, sir?" said Collins.

"Very often. Isaac went out in the field, you

know, to meditate at eventide. I don't think there is enough meditation among us now. David used to get up at midnight to think and pray. Well after dark *is* the best time. I love to wander alone here, and hold communion with my Father in heaven."

"I'm afraid I have interrupted you, sir," said James.

"It is open to all. It is your churchyard as well as mine. Why shouldn't all enjoy the same happiness?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be a happiness to all," said Collins.

"True," said the old gentleman dreamily. "Poor souls!"

Then there was a pause.

"Sir, my master has come back with me," remarked Collins suddenly: "young Mr. Stanhope, of the Towers, you know."

"Eh!—what?" exclaimed Mr. Marchmont, awakened out of his abstraction. "Mervyn Stanhope! No! Impossible! Mervyn Stanhope!"

"He has gone on to the Towers," said James. "Do you think old Mr. Stanhope will be glad to see him?"

"I couldn't say—I couldn't really undertake to say," returned Mr. Marchmont, shaking his head slowly. "He is a strange old gentleman, you know. Dear me! You don't really tell me it is true? Mervyn Stanhope come back! And you—why, you must be Jem Collins, 'Mischievous Jem!' I beg

your pardon, though. The old name came up, I don't know how."

"I 'm 'Mischievous Jem' that was, sir."

"Jem the Mischievous, and Jem the True," said Mr. Marchmont, smiling. "I was always hopeful for you. And you and young Mr. Stanhope are together still—'knight and squire,' as Miss Addie used to call you both."

"Did she?" said James. "How is Miss Addie, sir, —Miss Marchmont, I ought to say?"

"The sweetest lass that ever lived—which I oughtn't to say," responded Mr. Marchmont. "But you 'll forgive an old father's partiality. Come and see her, Collins. She isn't gone to bed yet. She always liked you, you know, for your devotion to Master Mervyn—Mr. Stanhope, I mean. I never shall remember that the lad is a man now. What a winning lad he was, only so grievously mismanaged! I didn't wonder at your affection for him. But you used to lead one another sadly into mischief. Come indoors, and have some supper, Collins."

"Thank you, sir, kindly; but I 'm in a hurry to see my own people. They 're all right, I suppose?" added Jem wistfully.

Mr. Marchmont was gazing up at the church, and did not hear the question.

"Yes, I remember so well seeing your merry face among the boys; it was almost always merry, Collins. I used to wish you would look grave once in a while."

"Maybe I've learnt by this time," said Jem. "I think, if you'll let me, I'll say good-bye now, and perhaps I may look in at the Vicarage to-morrow."

"By all means. By all means. Why, you haven't told me yet what has brought you both home?"

"No, sir. Perhaps I had best leave my master to tell you himself," said James thoughtfully.

"Well, you are right—quite right. I'm heartily glad to see you, Jem. You always were a favourite of mine, only you gave me many an anxious hour," said Mr. Marchmont, rubbing his hands slowly together. "But I thank my God that He has brought you home in safety."

"Thank you, sir. Good night."

Jem Collins passed on, and the old gentleman stood dreamily still. Suddenly a recollection flashed into his mind.

"What am I about? Why didn't I tell him?"

"Collins! Collins! Jem Collins!" he shouted, with a penetrating voice, which a stranger would scarcely have expected from that gentle, absent-looking man, till he had heard him preach.

But the recall sounded in vain. Collins had passed out of hearing.

"I shall forget my own existence next! What is to be done now?" groaned Mr. Marchmont self-reproachfully. "Poor Collins! Dear me! I do think it is a positive evil to be always so taken up with one idea as to forget everything else."

But Jem Collins, in happy ignorance of the clergy-

man's distress, was briskly pursuing his way. He had not very much farther to go.

Near—near—nearer he drew. He was in a lane at last, with only one turn between him and home.

How vividly that home presented itself before his mind's eye! The pretty gable-roofed cottage; the little flower garden; the latticed windows; the honeysuckle creeper; the grassy meadow in front; ay, and his mother's face of unbounded welcome, and his father's word of pardon for years of wilfulness past—all these stood forth in clear daylight before him.

Stood forth—but not in the moonlight—not in fact. He passed the corner, and remained like a man amazed! He swept his hand over his eyes, and looked again.

Where was the cottage home? Utterly gone!

A half-built white stone house was rising on the spot where the cottage should have been. A huge pan of mortar lay where James's favourite pinks and sweet-williams had once reared their heads. Blocks of stones and rows of bricks occupied the space filled in former days by standard-roses and sweet-peas, cauliflowers and asparagus.

James Collins had never dreamt of such a change as this.

Where was his home now—if home he had—in all the wide, wide world?

CHAPTER III.

HOW MERVYN WAS RECEIVED.

ELEVEN o'clock boomed out in deep tones from the old hall clock in Ickledale Towers, and with the last stroke of the eleven there came a ring at the front door. It was a gloomy old house. Outside a tolerable amount of repair had been kept up, and the garden was neat, though badly stocked with flowers; indeed, the masses of trees gave it rather the appearance of a shrubbery than of a garden. Within, however, the very word "repair" seemed to have been banished from the vocabulary of the owners.

The "owner," it would be more correct to say. Ida Stanhope would, no doubt, like any other young girl, have preferred to see things pretty and cheerful in style around her; but Ida had simply no voice whatever in the matter.

The old man and his granddaughter were sitting together that evening, after their custom, in the front parlour. There was a heavy mahogany table in the

centre with a lamp upon it, and the ponderous claw-legged chairs were varied by two huge red sofas belonging to a remote period, as evidenced by the board-like shape of back and sides. The walls had once been covered with a coating of pale green paint, a few patches of which still remained. Some grim old family portraits of men in armour were ranged stiffly at a good height from the ground. Three out of the five valuable china ornaments upon the mantelpiece had met with severe accidents, and the broken pieces were piled neatly together.

The badly-trimmed oil-lamp made these things dimly visible, and cast a glimmering light upon the figures of the old man and the young girl seated on either side.

Mr. Stanhope was past eighty in age ; short, slim, and stooping in figure. His face was singular, the features being so extravagantly aquiline as almost to amount to deformity, while the bushy grey eyebrows over-shadowed eyes dark and deep as caverns, bright even in old age, and capable of any variety of expression.

The graceful figure of the young girl formed a marked contrast. She did not look more than eighteen at the most, and her dress was plain and old-fashioned. Yet there was something, which even a careless observer would not have lightly passed over, in her pale face with its delicate outline, and the great brown eyes, half childlike, half womanly, in their lonely sadness.

"Grandfather, did you hear the bell?"

"Bell! eh?"

"The front-door bell, grandfather?"

"Stuff!"

"But it rang; indeed, it did. May I go and see who it can be?"

"Nonsense!"

Ida dared say no more. She sat upright, with a glow on her cheeks. Not that she was expecting any one or anything in particular: she only longed for any manner of variety in the monotony of her life.

"There it is again, grandfather," she exclaimed, as the rusty bell-wire creaked audibly, and a faint tinkle sounded from the kitchen regions.

"A beggar," grumbled Mr. Stanhope.

"I'll tell Lakins to send him away, if it is," said Ida, rising and taking the leave for granted.

She found the old man-servant fumbling at the front-door latch; the unwonted event of a ring at eleven o'clock having thrown him into such an agitation that he seemed likely to fumble for some time longer.

"Let me try, Lakins," she said impatiently.

"There now, let me be in peace for a minute, Miss Ida, and I'll get it done. You'd have to try a good bit before you could move this bolt. Ugh! Ah! That's it!" concluded the old man, with a tremendous effort.

The door stood open and a figure stepped in.

"Is Miss Stanhope at home? I want a word with her, if you please."

"I am here," said Ida, stepping forward.

For a minute they stood facing one another. The old man was still holding the door open, and the night-breeze swept the flame of the candle to and fro, making the grey shadows in the old quaint hall assume strange proportions.

"Lakins, you can shut the door," said the newcomer.

Lakins obeyed, exceedingly mystified at the acquaintance with his own name displayed.

"Don't either of you know me?"

They looked at him and at each other in silence.

"Ida!" he said falteringly.

"Sure, and it bain't the young master! Hooray!" shouted Lakins at the top of his voice, which, however, was a very feeble one.

"Mervyn! Is it really?" said Ida, in a bewildered way.

"Really. Are you sorry to see me, Ida?"

He took her hands, and gave her a brotherly kiss, as she stood with her eyes fixed upon him.

"I suppose I am glad," said Ida slowly. "Only it feels so strange, and I do not know you yet."

"Have you quite forgotten the old days?"

"I remember a tall boy who stuck pins into my doll, and made me cry. That is almost all. O no, not quite though, for I recollect your going away. Have you come to live at home?"

"Depends!" said Mervyn composedly, all demonstration of feeling being checked by her manner. "My grandfather may not want me—any more than you seem to do."

Ida came a step nearer, and looked at him wonderingly.

"Are you angry?" she said. "Not very, but a little angry, I mean. When grandfather is a little angry he often speaks like that, and then I know what is coming."

"I'm not angry. Only I thought you might be glad to see me, Ida. There is nobody else to give me a welcome."

"But I am glad," said Ida. "I think I am very glad indeed. If you are going to be kind to me, I am sure I shall be. Only I don't see people, and I don't know what I ought to say."

"It's time enough you should come back and look after your concerns, sir," said Lakins. "Shall I tell the master you are here, please, Master Mervyn?"

"Master!" repeated Mervyn, smiling. "Well, it does me good to hear the old title. I would I *were* a boy again, with all my heart. But, I say, don't tell your master yet; I'll take him by surprise. You may leave my bag here; I dare say I shall have to take it away in half an hour."

"Will you see him now?" asked Ida.

He drew a long breath and stood still.

"I wish Collins had come with me. He would think of the best plan of proceeding."

"Grandfather does not like Collins," said Ida. "Has he come back with you?"

"Yes. Don't let your mind be poisoned against him. He is the most faithful, true-hearted fellow that ever lived."

"Mother liked him," murmured Ida. "She always said so. Mervyn—Mervyn—why didn't you come home to mother?"

Mervyn turned away his head.

"She wanted you so much. It was hard when the weeks went by, and you never came, and we knew that she was dying. And she was praying for you up to the last. But you won't leave me now, again, will you, Mervyn? I'm not at all happy with grandfather."

"I'm not going unless he compels me," said Mervyn huskily. And to turn the subject, he added, "How old are you now?"

"Sixteen; but Lakins says I am as old as most girls of thirty."

"And I was just thinking that you are as young as most girls of twelve. But, my dear, we call them women—not girls—at thirty. See how old I am, and I am not thirty yet. Here we are. You go in first. Ah——"

Ida pushed the door open, and then stepped on one side. Mervyn entered with sudden composure, and went up to the table.

"Grandfather!" he said slowly.

"Eh! Ida! Mervyn! What's this? Mervyn?"

His shaggy brows contracted, and a gleam came into his eyes. Was it anger? Even Ida did not feel sure, though she feared.

"I 'm not coming to stay, unless you want to have me," said Mervyn, in a suppressed voice. "I know I behaved very ill, and I am sorry now; but the sorrow won't do anybody any good. I don't know whether you can forgive me. Mother would if she were here."

"What have you come for?" asked the old gentleman curtly.

Mervyn looked at Ida, fairly at a loss for an answer which might not irritate.

"I believe—it seemed right," he said at length.

"I shouldn't wonder if it did," said Mr. Stanhope with a sneer, which a keen observer might have seen to be somewhat forced. "I shouldn't wonder if it *is* right."

"I have no idea of remaining unless you want me," said Mervyn with a touch of his old haughtiness.

"*I* don't need you," said Mr. Stanhope. "Ida and I get on very well. You can come if you like, and then the estate will be yours. If not, I shall leave it to Ida."

Ida grew white as ashes. "It shall never be mine. I hope it never will be Mervyn's!" she muttered.

"Eh?" said Mr. Stanhope, only half over-hearing her.

"Grandfather, if Mervyn doesn't stay here, I mean to go away and keep house for him," said Ida.

"You mean! Ha! ha! You're not of age yet, my dear."

"But Mervyn is, and he has the first right over me," said Ida, with lips trembling like those of a frightened child.

Mr. Stanhope only laughed again, and said, "You hear, Mervyn! I don't wish to part with Ida, so you will have to stay too."

"I can remain to-night, at all events," said Mervyn wearily, feeling jaded and depressed. He did not know till then how he had been longing for a word of kindly welcome; how heavily the old wrong-doings, with their bitter consequences, lay at his heart.

Mr. Stanhope went back to his book without a word. Mervyn rose and left the room, beckoning Ida to follow him; and no sooner had the door closed behind the two than a considerable change passed over the old squire's features. His grim frown relaxed into a no less grim but decidedly exultant smile, and he snapped his bony fingers with sardonic pleasure.

"Won't do to let him feel himself cock of the walk yet, or he'll be at his old tricks! But let him go! Not I! He wants a bit of humbling, though, or I 'm much mistaken!"

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THINGS CAME ABOUT ORIGINALLY.

A BACKWARD glance over the earlier history of Mervyn Stanhope and James Collins is needful before we proceed.

More than twenty years before, James Stanhope, Captain in the Royal Navy, retired from his profession, partly on account of failing health, partly in accordance with his father's wish, and came to live in Ickledale Towers, with his wife and only little boy.

It was a trying change for the gallant captain. To exchange his favourite watery element for dry land was bad enough in his opinion, but to leave his free and active life on board ship for the monotonous existence of Ickledale Towers was worse still. Moreover, he found it exceedingly difficult to get on with his father. Captain Stanhope was a generous character, and a man of the highest principle, but he

was naturally quick-tempered, and very much accustomed to having his own way. The grasping ways of the morose old squire were oftentimes too much for his patience, and but for his peace-making wife he would hardly have remained long in his own home. It was chiefly, however, on her account that he had resolved to settle down there, since neither he nor she liked to insist on leaving the old man in his loneliness, while at the same time Captain Stanhope had gradually become aware that his wife was very unhappy in his absence.

The determined seclusion of his father cut Captain Stanhope off from almost all intercourse with the families around of his own standing, but neither he nor his wife were people who could live idle lives. They began visiting among their poorer neighbours, receiving always a kindly welcome. And if they had not much at their command of this world's goods—since, however wealthy old Mr. Stanhope might be in fact, his household benefited but little by this same wealth—they had at least rich gifts to bestow of sympathy and love.

Not long after the captain's return he became acquainted with a certain William Collins, foreman of the Ickledale building firm, Harrison & Co., a sensible, well-informed artisan, and a man of like principles with himself. Captain Stanhope found in his a kindred spirit, and the two enjoyed some pleasant intercourse upon subjects of great and common interest to them both.

It was about this time that Mervyn Stanhope and Jem Collins, children of about seven or eight years old, were first thrown together. The friendship began somewhat singularly. Mervyn was a nervous, delicate little fellow, by no means wanting in spirit when aroused, but constantly out of health, and excited into illness by a sharp word. Jem Collins was a handsome, vigorous boy, full of tricks and fun, but straightforward and truthful as the day.

From the time of their earliest meeting each child seem fascinated by the other. Mervyn was charmed with Jem's frolics and fearlessness, and Jem's honest child-heart went out toward the frail but winning grandson of the old squire with a fervour which might amuse people at the time, but which never after slackened.

If anything special were needed to clench the friendship, this too proved not lacking. The children were playing one day beside a pond, when Mervyn slipped in. Being beyond his depth, and unable to swim, he would have been drowned to a certainty, had not spirited little Jem lowered himself over the water by means of a tough ash bough, grasped the struggling child, and, at the imminent risk of his own life, supported his companion till his cries for help were heard and answered.

After this it was no wonder that the grateful captain loved to see the two boys together.

Matters continued thus, with tolerable smoothness, for some four years or more, during which time

the little Ida was born. And then the brave captain was taken away by death.

It was a sad loss for them all: sad for the poor wife, sad for the little unconscious girl, sad for the harsh-spirited old grandfather, sad for the Collins family and the many poor people whom he had befriended, sad for the good old clergyman who had felt his cordial sympathy so pleasant and helpful; but perhaps almost saddest of all for the two boy friends, Mervyn and Jem.

They did not themselves realize how great was the loss which had befallen them, sorely as they missed his kind companionship. It was the absence of his wise control and training which proved most sad.

For gradually there crept a change over the scene. It did not show much for a few months, but the mother saw it coming. She saw it coming through two or three years, before it broke into anything of open difficulty.

Now that his father was dead there was none who could stand between Mervyn and his grandfather Old Mr. Stanhope had yielded in a measure to his son's strong will, but he would brook no womanly interference. Soon there arose chafing and rasping between him and his grandson. The old man was harsh and unreasonable; the boy was resentful and bent upon his own way. Month by month the breach widened, driving the two farther apart.

No doubt at this time Jem Collins was by no

means so good a companion for Mervyn as he had once been. He was honest and truthful still, but wild and mischief-seeking. He and Mervyn led each other into difficulties, and incited each other to a spirit of rebellion.

Had the Captain been still alive he would have seen the evil, and would, doubtless, in some measure have checked the intimacy. But Mrs. Stanhope, remembering his dying prayer for blessing on the two boys, could not find it in her heart to do so.

After a while Mr. Stanhope took the matter up. A certain piece of joint wrong-doing, which he considered, and justly considered, ungentlemanly, aroused his ire past endurance. Jem Collins was stigmatized as the source of all the ill, and was sternly forbidden the precincts of the Towers, Mervyn being as sternly prohibited from holding intercourse with him.

Mervyn flatly disobeyed. The order was renewed, and severe chastisement followed upon the offence. The boy was growing gloomy, and perpetually talked to his mother about leaving home. She could not bear to lose him, and besought that he would have patience. Again he disobeyed, and scenes of renewed anger and discord followed. Those were miserable months at the Towers.

Nor was Jem Collins much happier. He could not but feel that much—though by no means all—of Mervyn Stanhope's unhappiness might be traced to himself; and he looked back regretfully to those

bright days when Captain Stanhope had seemed to make all wheels run smoothly.

Moreover, there was a difficulty in Jem Collins' life. Jem's father had set his heart on seeing Jem in his own trade. It was perfectly natural. No wonder he was startled and aggrieved when his only boy avowed a determination to have nothing to do with building.

William Collins was very patient at first. Why not? he wanted to know. What objection had Jem to it? None at all, seemingly, if Jem's own protestations were to be trusted. Was it that he was too proud?—that he thought it beneath him? The boy grew indignant at the bare supposition. He didn't see any room for pride. A mason could be as good a man as a duke, he supposed. Then had he set his heart on any other trade? No; Jem couldn't say he had. He didn't want to enter any trade at all at present. What! did he mean to set up for a penniless gentleman? William Collins asked this scornfully. What did it all mean?

"The fact is, father, as soon as ever Master Mervyn can get away, he'll leave Ickledale, and I must be free to go with him."

The truth came out thus bluntly. William Collins laughed at first, but he soon found it to be no laughing matter. Then he grew angry, and his wife became distressed, but the boy's resolution never faltered. They scolded him and they pleaded with him, but in vain. Did he love Mr. Stanhope more

than them? his mother asked. Jem refused to institute comparisons. He only knew Master Mervyn had always talked of going abroad, and he had promised Master Mervyn to go with him. His father couldn't wish a promise to be broken. William Collins sought to convince Jem that he had no right to give any such promise; but he could make no impression. Jem maintained persistently that the promise was made, and could not be unmade. He went so far as to declare that if he could not gain permission to go, he should go without permission.

Mr. Marchmont was called into their counsels. He seriously warned Jem of the evil of such headstrong determination, and advised William Collins to press for no immediate decision.

So for a few months the matter remained in abeyance. Then the question narrowed to a point.

For at the Towers affairs grew worse. Mervyn's temper, goaded and rasped beyond control, was almost more at times than his mother herself could bear; though fits of his old penitence and attractiveness would at times break through the gloom, like sunshine through a November mist. But his health was suffering severely from this perpetual agitation. And at length he openly declared he could no longer remain at Ickledale.

Mr. Stanhope received the declaration cynically, shrugged his shoulders, and asked what Mervyn meant to do.

"Anything," Mervyn answered.

"Well, he was quite at liberty to do 'anything.' Only if he chose to go away without leave, he had better not come back without leave either."

For a little while still his mother's pleadings deferred the evil day. The two boys met and consulted often in secret. Jem's hot sympathy in Mervyn's wrongs was sweet to him, but by no means did him good.

This renewal of intercourse came again to Mr. Stanhope's ears. He had just cause for anger, but his anger went far beyond just displeasure. He desired Mervyn once and for all to choose between his home and his mother on one side, and Jem Collins on the other.

"My mother and slavery, you mean," Mervyn answered haughtily. "Very well, I choose Collins and freedom."

He held to his point. Even when Mr. Stanhope cooled down, and would fain have persuaded him to alter, Mervyn's resolve could not be shaken.

And Jem Collins held to *his* point. Where Mervyn went, Jem would go. Reasoning and remonstrance proved useless.

So it came to pass that these two—Mervyn Stanhope and James Collins—went out into the world together when both were but verging on manhood.

They did not go absolutely without permission. Jem Collins won a reluctant consent from his

parents, and Mervyn wrung unwillingly leave from his mother. But the permission was only given because it was plainly evident that the young men would follow their own course with or without it.

William Collins was deeply displeased. He did not refuse a parting blessing to his son; neither did Mervyn's sorrowing mother show anger in her tenderness. But such wilful following of their own way might well be expected to bring a smart with it.

Nor did the two go absolutely without means. Mr. Stanhope paid Mervyn's vovage to Canada, and gave him somewhat to start him in his new life, plainly intimating that the young man might expect no more from him.

William Collins likewise undertook the expense of his son's voyage, but could afford to give him nothing over.

So they went to Canada. And after a while of hardship and struggling, they gathered together enough to take them to Australia. Mervyn was restless in his banishment, and hoped for better success in another colony. But truly, as Collins said, they had found no marked blessing on their efforts.

Yet, they had been guarded and brought home in safety. The dying prayers of Mervyn's mother had surely not fallen to the ground.

CHAPTER V.

JEM GETS SOMETHING COOLING.

HOW long James Collins stood in blank bewilderment, gazing at the white walls of the half-built house, he never knew.

Suddenly he awoke from his trance of dismay. "They have gone to live somewhere else, of course," he muttered, brushing away some cold drops which had gathered on his forehead. "Mr. Marchmont would have told me if anything was wrong. I wonder how father ever came to give up the cottage. It goes to my heart to see the old place so changed. I'll make haste back to the Vicarage and ask Mr. Marchmont. No, I won't, though. On second thoughts, the Towers' cottage is nearer."

Turning back again, he retraced his steps into Ickledale, bending his course, however, more in a northerly direction than that by which he had come. There was something now of feverish haste in his

walk, replacing the steadiness which had characterized it before. After a while he reached a row of tiny red-brick cottages.

No. 5 was speedily gained. But Jem paused, and looked doubtfully at the closed blinds. It was very late, and very dark. What if he were to frighten the inmates, by calling them up at such an hour?

Mrs. Towers had been a widow for twenty years past, supporting herself chiefly by needlework. Cherry Towers had been one of Jem's playmates in his boyish days. There had, once upon a time, been no individual in all Ickledale, old or young, more thoroughly intimate in Mrs. Towers' little home than Jem Collins. He had never allowed his mischievous propensities to make any appearance there; but, on the contrary, had proved himself so useful a helper to Mrs. Towers, and so brotherly a protector to Cherry, that they thought him the very best of boys, and indignantly repudiated any charge that was ever brought against him.

Still Jim did not like to rouse them out of their sleep at such a time. Why, it was nearly midnight.

What else was he to do, however? Even Mr. Marchmont was doubtless in bed long ere this, and Jem could not exactly sleep in the street till morning.

He pulled the bell gently at first, then harder, but there was no response. He gave a third and yet sharper pull.

No result followed. Jem was getting tired and impatient, and the mystery about his parents weighed

upon him. He picked up some small stones, and disrespectfully flung them up against the window of Mrs. Towers' bedroom. They rattled sharply against the shutter, and fell back.

Success this time! He heard the sound of an opening bolt, and caught a glimpse of a dishevelled head, which certainly did not belong to Widow Towers, thrust partially out.

"Hoy!" said a voice.

"I say," began Jem, rather abashed.

"Hoy! What are ye after now, young 'un? I know yer tricks."

How exactly like old days it felt. Jem really had been wont, once upon a time, to try a little mischief of this sort, only it was not mischief now, but sober earnest.

"Does Mrs. Towers live here, please?" inquired Jem.

"No, she don't; nor Mrs. Bowers neither. Like your impudence, coming rousing up respectable folk at this time o' night!"

"I thought you were an old friend. I 'm sure I beg your pardon," said Jem.

"Give it him well!" screamed some shrill tones from certain regions to the rear of the dishevelled head. "It 's a downright shame, them boys being allowed——

"'Taint a boy——"

"Just tell me where Mrs. Towers lives, and I 'll be off," called Jem.

But the double remonstrance proved unavailing. The dishevelled head vanished, as if suddenly pulled back, and another head, with two stout arms, and a white jug, appeared in its stead. Before Jem could so much as wink, splash came a good supply of water at his feet, happily not too well aimed. Nevertheless, he obtained his share, in the shape of a very considerable sprinkling.

Jem did not like it. The red colour flashed up into his face, and hot words very nearly passed his lips. But he controlled himself with a strong effort—ay, and something more than a mere effort of his own will.

"Thank you; I'm very thirsty, so it didn't come too soon," he called out pleasantly. "But it's a cold welcome you are giving me in England, after ten years away.

"Ten years!" exclaimed the first head, thrusting itself out again, while the second vanished.

"Ay; but I don't want to disturb you. Just tell me where I can find Widow Towers."

"Number Fifteen, round the corner. Hope you ain't wet, man. I thought you weren't one of them worrying boys. Just like you, Bet; always getting into blunders."

Bet must have been ashamed, for she maintained a discreet silence.

"Not very," said Jem. "Just enough to cool a fellow down."

"Well, you're a good-natured chap, if there ever

was one," said the man admiringly. "Good-night Can't do anything for you, can I?"

"No—at least—could you tell me where William Collins and his wife live?"

"William Collins? Why, he's dead—nigh a year gone by."

Deep silence from below answered him. Jem felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet.

"Hope he wasn't a particular friend of yours," said the man in a tone of concern.

No answer came. Jem was not thinking. He was hardly conscious of distress yet. The blow had half stunned him.

"Died of some sort of fever," said the man. "Everybody was sorry for it. And then his wife married again—poor thing!"

"No!" exclaimed Jem, effectually roused.

"She did—and not over wisely. But she was lonely, you see; hadn't husband nor son—leastways, her son was as good as lost to her. So she married again, though folks did warn her that her new husband would prove a bit of a rascal. I don't know whether he is or not, for my part; but, any way, he's a queer sort of chap. He sold her cottage to the squire, and made good profit by it, I've heard; but I can't say if it's true. And he and his wife went off away from Ickledale, all sudden like, nobody knew where. That's all I can tell you."

"Thank you," said Jem mechanically. "Good-night."

"Good-night," said the man. "Sorry your friends have been in trouble, and sorry the missus gave you a wetting."

"It is no matter," said Jem.

He walked onwards, quietly and steadily, not pausing at "Number Fifteen, round the corner," but passing through two or three streets, till he came to a deserted lane; for the home of Mrs. Towers was very close to the borders of Ickledale.

Jem did not feel inclined to see even Mrs. Towers —even his old friend Cherry—as yet. He was too much stunned to thirst for further particulars.

And for hours in the silence of that dark night, until the dawn broke over the hill-tops, James Collins paced restlessly to and fro, eating the bitter fruit of doings in days gone by.

His father dead! His mother gone! It might have been just the same if Jem had remained at home; or it might *not* have been the same.

Well, it was of his own free will that he went away. James knew that; but his remorse was by no means lessened by so knowing.

And he believed that the wrong doings of his wilful past had been freely forgiven him by his heavenly Father, for the sake of One who died on Calvary. But this made him long more rather than less for the expression of pardon from those friends whom he had wronged.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. MARCHMONT EXPLAINS SOMEWHAT.

THE moment Mr. Marchmont found that he could not recall Jem Collins, he hurried down the narrow pathway which led into the Vicarage garden, and thence with hasty steps entered the front door.

"Addie! Addie, my dear, come here."

This appeal was more successful. A young lady ran quickly down the staircase.

Adela Marchmont was certainly sweet-looking enough to justify her father's enthusiasm. She might have been about twenty years of age, and her fair brow and soft eyes seemed already to have caught her father's happy serenity of expression, though without his rather inconvenient abstraction.

"Not gone to bed yet, Addie! Naughty girl! But I was afraid it would be so."

"Father, I wonder what time of night or morning you would come in, if you did not know that I was

waiting for you. I think my duty is very clear on this point."

"Well, well, we must settle that another time. Only I don't like such late hours for you, my dear. But who do you think I have just seen?"

Addie guessed half a dozen names at random, as fast as she could speak. Of course they were all wrong.

"No, no; let me tell you," said Mr. Marchmont, as soon as he could get a word in. "James Collins. Mischievous Jem himself. Only imagine! And he tells me that Mervyn Stanhope has returned to the Towers."

Addie flushed up and clasped her hands.

"Oh, I am glad! I am glad!" she said fervently. "His poor mother did wish it so. And I am glad for poor Ida's sake. But do you think cousin Rutherford Stanhope will take him in?"

For Mr. Stanhope, the old squire, was second cousin to Mr. Marchmont's father, thereby bestowing upon Addie Marchmont and Mervyn Stanhope the shadowy tie of fourth cousinship. It was a connection so distant as scarcely to merit consideration; only each party being almost without other relations n the world, they perhaps made the most of it.

"I really couldn't undertake to say," responded Mr. Marchmont to Addie, as he had done to Jem Collins. "But, my dear, only think; I have made such a terrible blunder. I can't wait a moment now. Young Collins and I were talking of different things and positively it never occurred to me to tell him of, his mother's marriage and disappearance. I forgot

that the news could not of course have reached him. Poor fellow!"

"But you are not going out again now?"

"My dear, I must. I could not rest after my stupid carelessness without seeing him. I'll be back as soon as possible. Very likely the poor fellow may be glad of a bed here to-night."

Supperless, but eager, the kind old gentleman set off again upon his self-imposed task.

He walked rapidly, but he did not overtake Jem Collins. When he reached the half-built white house Jem was gone. Where else to search for him Mr. Marchmont did not know. The thought of Mrs. Towers and her daughter, Jem's special friends, occurred to him; and late as it was, he took the trouble to walk all round by their little house. He could see no signs of life within, however, and would not disturb the sleepers to make inquiries. Hoping Jem might have found his way back to the Vicarage, Mr. Marchmont retraced his steps. But Jem was not there.

Breakfast was early at the Vicarage. Early as it was, however, Mr. Marchmont took a stroll beforehand, in the vague hope of somehow stumbling upon Jem Collins. He was not quite sure whether he should recognise Jem, but he had no doubt that Jem would recognise him.

He came back, disappointed, from his stroll, walking, after a certain favourite fashion, with his eyes bent studiously on the ground, and his two

hands meeting lightly behind his back to grasp a walking-stick. Suddenly a voice said—

"Good morning, sir."

"Collins!" exclaimed Mr. Marchmont, and then more doubtfully, "*Is* it?" For this grave and haggard man did not bear much resemblance to Mischievous Jem.

"Yes, sir. I'm Jem Collins."

"I shouldn't have known you. It was dark yesterday, you see, and—and—Have you had any breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"Where have you slept?"

"I couldn't sleep, sir. I've been——"

"Where?"

"Walking in a lane."

"Since when? Not all night? My poor boy!"

The pitying tone and the fatherly hand laid upon his arm were almost more than Jem could stand. Yet they did him good too.

"You should not have done it, now, Jem—you know you shouldn't," said Mr. Marchmont gently. "Why did you not come back to me?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't seem to care to see anybody at first."

"Poor fellow. It took you by surprise, didn't it? And I never said a word to prepare you for the change. In fact, I was thinking so much of your return, and of young Mr. Stanhope, that I never remembered this in connection with you. I suppose Mrs. Towers has told you all about the matter?"

"No, sir. I 'm come to you," said Jem. "It seemed to me that you 'd be more likely to tell me what I most want to know."

"Stop a moment. I 'll order a good breakfast to be ready for you, and you shall ask what you like. Sit down on that bench, Collins. I 'll be back in a moment."

Moving with much celerity, Mr. Marchmont really was absent very little longer than he had said. "Now, Jem!" and he took a seat beside the returned traveller.

"About my father, sir?" said Jem, with difficulty. "I shouldn't wonder if you were called in to see him at the last."

"Yes. Did you not get my letter?"

"There 's many letters have missed," said Jem. "My master and I moved pretty often, and they didn't get forwarded. The first I heard of my father's death was yesterday evening. And I thought maybe you could tell me if he forgave me before he died."

"Most fully and freely. He was too ill to say much, but there was no mistaking the expression of his face. I said to him, 'Then, Collins, I may write word to Jem that he has your pardon?' The answer was emphatic. 'As surely as my Saviour has forgiven me.' And he added, 'Poor Jem! I hope I wasn't hard on him. Tell him to come home some day, and take care of his mother.'"

"Wouldn't I, if I could?" sighed Jem. "Thank

you, sir. It 's a great weight off, to know he said that. But about my mother——"

"About her—yes. It was a strange affair, Jem. Nobody seemed to know who or what this man was —your stepfather, I mean. His name is Randall Woollatt. Smooth-spoken enough; but he never looked any one in the face. I didn't like that. I never do. It always shows something wrong. The most hopeful thing about you, Collins, as a boy, was, that you never seemed to shrink from looking one in the face—not rudely, but frankly. You were daring and mischievous, but never underhand."

"I hope not, sir," said Jem.

"I 'm wandering from my point, though. Well, I advised your mother, and so did others, not to have this man; but a woman bent on her own way is hard to convince. She said she was lonely, and he seemed kind, and she knew he would make her happy. I asked her if he was one with whom she could walk in God's ways, and she parried the question. Your mother wasn't quite so decided about these things as your father, Jem; only, while he lived, she seemed to feel with him."

Jem shook his head a little. He remembered the difference.

"It wasn't more than a month after Woollatt's first appearance when he married her. We thought they would settle down in the old cottage, when all at once it became known that Woollatt had sold it to Mr. Stanhope. I went to see Mrs. Woollatt, and

found her alone—evidently in distress, but much reserved; and the next morning they left the place, giving no warning, saying good-bye to no one, and leaving no address."

"And nothing has been traced?" said Collins anxiously.

"Nothing. I made various inquiries, but failed to discover their whereabouts. There was no one except myself who seemed to have any call to move in the matter. But I could find out nothing."

"And nobody has a notion what could have made them go?"

"There are ideas and conjectures in plenty, but I would advise you not to listen to them too much. They will only distress you to no purpose. Better look away from man, Collins, and up to HIM in whose hands are the issues of all things."

"Yes, sir; I 'm thankful I have that comfort, anyway," said James, in a subdued voice.

"Don't speak as if it were but a small comfort; it ought to be a great one. Cheer up, Collins; these tangles will be cleared in time. And now come indoors and have some breakfast while I go and take mine. I see Mrs. Bond is beckoning. You remember my old housekeeper?"

Yes, Jem remembered her, and he enjoyed a chat with the kind old woman while partaking of a hearty meal. It must be confessed that he felt considerably lighter in heart, as well as more vigorous in body, after this double refreshment.

CHAPTER VII.

IDA HAS A CERTAIN DESIRE.

NOT for years past had there been heard in the old hall of Ickledale Towers such peals of laughter as issued therefrom on the morning after the memorable day which witnessed Mervyn Stanhope's return to the home of his forefathers.

Mervyn Stanhope was one of those curiously variable characters which are almost as much subject to changes of temperature as the atmosphere of Britain itself. Now up, now down; one hour at a height of buoyant enjoyment, the next hour almost causelessly at the lowest ebb of depression; he bore, in fact, more resemblance to a barometer than to anything else in nature. It was a regrettable idiosyncrasy, perhaps, but it did not imply shallowness of character.

Mervyn came home at night thoroughly depressed, out of sorts, hopeless about his future. He rose in

the morning in a state of boyish glee and spirits. Not that the pain about his mother had died a sudden death ; but it was an old pain, called vividly up by the circumstances of his return, and this morning pressed into the background.

Breakfast was over—a meagre and unsatisfactory breakfast it must be confessed ; not half so good a one as James Collins had enjoyed a little earlier in the housekeeper's room at the Vicarage. Neither Mervyn nor Ida, however, were particular about eating.

Ida was by this time in great delight at her brother's return. She showed it in an odd, silent way : following him about wherever he went, like a child ; hanging with intense eagerness on all he said ; and laughing merrily, though almost mutely, at his odd stories. Yet there was an unchildlike shadow of some hidden trouble or perplexity in her eyes, which never left them. Mervyn watched her closely, but could make nothing of it.

He did his best to rouse her to natural girlish brightness that morning, and partly succeeded. Even old Lakins, coming in and out, was fain to laugh at some of the "young master's" tales of Australian bush-life. Mr. Stanhope, on the contrary, laughed at nothing, though a satisfied grunt of acquiescence occasionally betrayed a measure of appreciation. He broke into one of the stories at length, however, with an entirely irrelevant question :—

"What of James Collins, Mervyn?"

Ay, what? Mervyn had put aside this anxiety for a while, but he knew it must soon come up.

"Collins has come home with me, grandfather. He is in Ickledale."

"Ho!"

"That particular monosyllable carried a sound of displeasure to Ida's ears. She quaked inwardly.

"A man never had a more faithful follower than he has been to me."

"Hum!"

It was scornful incredulity this time.

"I am telling you simple truth," said Mervyn, with glowing eyes. "He has been with me in trouble and danger, and we have shared our last crust together before now. He has twice saved my life at the peril of his own—not counting our boyish adventure. He has nursed me through three desperate illnesses, when I must have died but for his devoted care. He has absolutely lived for me. I cannot, and I *will not*, cast him off."

"Ha!'

Not even Ida could read the old gentleman's meaning now.

"More than that. I should never have come home —I verily believe, never—but for Collins. He is not what he used to be. A steadier fellow than he has been for the last year or two never breathed. He was at me for months about returning, and at last settled the point by declaring that it had grown into

a point of conscience with him, and come he must and should, whether I would or no. It cost the poor fellow a terrible deal to say that; but he was pulled nearly to pieces between his love for me and his sense of what was right. I couldn't resolve to remain behind, so I came too. You have to thank Collins for bringing me!"

"Eh?" said the old squire in an almost ludicrous tone of surprise. "Jem Collins with a conscience!"

"I wish I had as keen a one, or were as quick to obey it," muttered Mervyn.

"Where 's the fellow?" asked Mr. Stanhope.

"I told him to be here at twelve o'clock—and he can stay with me, or I can go with him, whichever you prefer."

"Oh, Mervyn!" whispered Ida.

"Humph!" said Mr. Stanhope, rising. "If he remains here, you 'd better tell him to keep out of my way, that 's all. I don't like him."

The brother and sister sat looking at each other in amazement as the old man shuffled heavily out of the hall. It was a low square place, slightly furnished, and often used as a kind of sitting or lounging-room for odd half-hours.

"Mervyn, he must be pleased to have you back, or he would never give way so quickly," said Ida.

"Pleased after a fashion, perhaps. But yours is the genuine pleasure. I have not known all these ears what it would be to have a sister. I think I forgotten."

Ida came and stood by him, with clasped hands.

"Mervyn, I want to ask you something—no, two things, but *one* I can't ask yet."

"Why not? Don't be afraid of me," he said kindly.

"I don't think I am, but I must know you better first. Perhaps then you will be able to help me. I have never had anyone to help me since mother died, and I am often puzzled to know what is right."

"What do you do when you are puzzled?" he asked, looking at her troubled face.

Ida flushed.

"Mother used to pray," she said, in a low voice, "and that always seemed to make her happy again. I have tried lately sometimes—when I haven't known what to do. But there is one great, great puzzle——"

"Tell it to me, Ida."

"No," she said decisively; "I can't do that. I don't know whether I ought. I'm not sure whether I have any right; and if once I told, then I could not possibly un-tell it again, you know. Some day, when I know you better, I will ask you a question which has something to do with it, and if you can answer me, that may be a help. I may see more plainly by-and-by what is the right thing to be done. I only wish I could tell. You don't know what a great weight it is on me."

"My dear child, you are too young for such secrets and perplexities," said Mervyn.

"Am I? But I feel old. Mervyn, there's one other thing I was going to say, only I don't know whether you will like it. People are sometimes angry when I do not expect them to be."

"Say anything in the world, and I will not mind."

"I want you to marry," she whispered, with a bright tint in her cheeks. "I want you very much to marry."

"Why, Ida," he said, extremely amused, "I did not expect to find so romantic a sister."

"I am not romantic. But I do want you to marry a particular person so much, Mervyn. You can't think how nice she is—so sweet and good and kind. Everybody loves her. Oh, do promise me you will!"

"Silly child!" he said, laughing. "She would probably say 'No' at once, even if I put the question. And do you know I don't feel inclined at all to do that."

"Don't you?" Ida said sorrowfully. "But perhaps you may when you have seen her. I am sure you would directly, if only you knew my reason."

"What is the reason, Ida?"

"I can't tell you that; but it is a very important one—it is indeed."

"What! is the young lady a modern Andromache in the grasp of a cruel monster of a father, and am I to rush in and rescue her at all hazards?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Ida, startled out of her

self-possession. "There never was anybody less like a monster than Mr. March—— Oh, but I didn't mean——"

Mervyn pretended not to have understood.

"Well, whoever this wonderful paragon of a young lady may be, I am glad you have such a friend," he said, smiling. "But mind, Ida, you must never breathe one whisper of your little fancy to anybody, least of all to the lady concerned. Be sure you don't. I have not the very least intention of marrying anybody; but if I ever were to take such a notion into my head, your talking about your scheme would effectually prevent it from ever coming to pass."

Ida promised, with a somewhat disappointed face. She little knew that the step she had already taken was the one of all others most calculated to hinder the fulfilment of her wishes. Forewarned is forearmed. Mervyn was very unlikely, after this, to fall hastily in love with Addie Marchmont.



CHAPTER VIII.

JEM ALSO HAS A PARTICULAR WISH.

"SEEMS home-like to be here again, Cherry."

Jem Collins evidently felt himself in a pleasant situation. Three days had passed since his arrival in Ickledale, and he was now seated at tea in Mrs. Towers' tiny parlour, the widow being opposite and Cherry between the two.

Mrs. Towers was very poor, but nobody could have guessed this fact from the appearance of her little dwelling. Her husband had been a collier with exceptionally good pay; and though at his death, soon after Cherry's birth, he left her almost destitute, yet she still retained the good furniture, the nice books, and the many little comforts which he had procured in his lifetime. Mrs. Towers could not bear to part with one unnecessarily; and though at times reduced to severe straits, yet she had never

been brought to such a pass as to compel her to pawn her possessions for a meal.

The little room was, in fact, rather overstocked with chairs, but that was better than if it had been too empty. Some prettily-arranged wild flowers filled a blue vase upon the mantel-shelf, and the tea-service was of white china, with small red flowers twining over it. Mrs. Towers was a comely middle-aged body, and Cherry's rosy face, with its bright eyes and shy smile, had just the look of a pink-tipped daisy peeping up towards the sunlight.

Jem thought he had never seen a head of hair so smooth and glossy as Cherry's, or hands so quick and quiet in their movements. What a comfortable little wife she would some day make for somebody! and what a happy man that body would be!

"It feels just like old days to have you here again, Jem," said Cherry simply, in answer to his remark. "Mother and I have often missed you—haven't we, mother?"

"To be sure we have," said Mrs. Towers. "Why, it was only the other day, when we wanted a creeper nailed up in the garden, and I says to Cherry, 'Cherry,' says I, 'if Jem Collins was here, he'd be the lad to do it for us, and we not a penny out of pocket.' Dear me! why there's never been another boy in the place that's been what you used to be—so useful and handy like."

"Well, I hope you'll make any manner of use of

me now that you can," said Jem. "I've had a deal of training in most practical matters."

"I'm sure you're very good," said Mrs. Towers. "Cherry and me's a lone couple, and a friend in need's a friend indeed to us. I shouldn't wonder now, Cherry, I shouldn't, if Jem wouldn't mind giving a look to that chair which tilts up so awkward when anybody sits on it."

"Oh, mother, there's no hurry," said Cherry, blushing, and wishing her mother wouldn't seem to make Jem's return a mere matter of personal convenience; while Jem sprang up with alacrity, and offered his services immediately.

"No, no; by-and-by will do, as Cherry says," returned Mrs. Towers. "You're going to eat a good tea now, ain't you? Give him more sugar, Cherry; don't you remember how fond he was of sugar?"

"Yes; but I don't care for it now," said Jem. "Thank you, Cherry; it's beautiful tea."

"Dear me! if you'd only come back a year ago, before all these changes!" said Mrs. Towers, giving thereby a sharp dig into the wound in poor Jem's heart. Of course she did not mean anything by it. People never do.

"Mother—don't," murmured Cherry.

"I wish I had," said Jem, sighing. "But wishing does no good now."

"No more it doesn't," said Mrs. Towers cheerfully, as if this were a real consolation. "Don't it seem odd though, to think of your home being at the



"Mother and I have often missed you—haven't we, mother?"—*p.* 63.

Towers, after the Squire being so bitter against you?"

"I wish my home *was* at the Towers," said Jem softly, with a little glance at Cherry; "and another sort of Towers."

Cherry blushed, but said, "Oh, no, Jem; you couldn't wish your home to be anywhere except with Mr. Mervyn Stanhope."

"No, that I couldn't either," assented Jem. "I wouldn't ever leave him of my own free will. Why, you don't know what him and me have been to each other in the countries we've been to, Cherry—not a soul beside that cared for either of us! Well, then, I wish——"

"Wouldn't it be better to be content with what we have, and not be wanting anything else?" asked Cherry, in a pretty old-fashioned way. "It's nice that you are back. Isn't Miss Stanhope pleased?"

"Ay, that she is; and old Mr. Stanhope too, if he was but willing to show it," said Jem.

"And isn't he?" asked Mrs. Towers.

"Well, not just as you and Cherry do to me," said Jem with caution.

"Won't you take some more tea, Jem?" asked Cherry.

Jem really did not want any, but of course he handed up his cup.

Presently the cosy meal was finished, and Widow Towers made Jem sit down in her comfortable easy chair near the window, while Cherry went tripping to

and fro between the table and the cupboards, putting away the tea-things, with one or two journeys to the pantry. She deferred the usual prompt washing-up until after Jem's departure. Jem watched her with admiring interest.

"She's grown, ain't she?" said the widow, in one of the brief intervals of Cherry's absence.

"She's grown prettier than ever," said Jem. "And 'pretty' isn't the word neither. I've seen lots of girls fifty times prettier than Cherry, who wasn't a fiftieth part so well worth looking at."

Mrs. Towers nodded her head complacently, and deemed this a very well-turned compliment indeed.

"My Cherry hasn't her head full of nonsense neither, like other girls. She's as wise-like now as ever, and won't have a word to say to them idle lads, as ain't fit to hold a candle to her. She might have married two years ago if she'd been in a hurry, but she wasn't, nor I neither. There's *somebody* now, though——"

"Eh?" said Jem, startled.

Mrs. Towers nodded her head, and pursed up her lips with a shrewd expression. "Yes, there's *somebody!*" she said emphatically. "'Tisn't anybody in the world that'll do for my Cherry; but there's *somebody* now."

And then Cherry came tripping back, and Mrs. Towers resumed her knitting, with a bland smile.

"Pretty nearly done now, child?"

"Yes, mother. I 'm only going to put the flowers on the table."

"And then you can come and sit down here," said Mrs. Towers. "I 'd quite forgot there was one thing upstairs which must be done ; but I 'll be back in five minutes."

Jem felt desperate. There was somebody—somebody! Who was this somebody? What had this somebody to do with Cherry?

"You 'll get on all right for five minutes, won't you?" said Mrs. Towers. "Deary me, I feel as if I had a boy of my own come back, and was leaving you together like a real brother and sister. Cherry always did say you was like to her own brother."

"Did she?" said Jem. "Well, if you 're my sister, Cherry, you won't mind me asking you for a bit of my favourite old sweet-william out of the corner of your garden—the one that 's like claret-coloured velvet, you know."

"Mind it! no!" said Cherry. "I have a piece here, in my nosegay ; the only flower that isn't wild—so it 's best away from the rest. Wasn't it funny, mother? I thought of Jem when I was picking it, because he always liked that plant ; but I didn't know he was going to ask me for it."

"It 's a pity to spoil your nosegay," said Jem. "I 'd sooner you should fetch me a bit from your garden, Cherry."

"Oh, but it won't spoil the nosegay," said Cherry,

carefully abstracting the flower. "There isn't another piece on the plant so pretty as this."

Mrs. Towers walked off, and Jem felt that his ingenuity had failed.

It was a great trial to him. He had been wanting so much to have a quiet little chat with Cherry, that he might begin gently to test how far she was still the same that she had once been. And now that the opportunity had arrived, Jem found himself unable to make use of it. His mind was fairly racked with the idea of that "somebody!" Instead of being able to say to Cherry the hundred and one things he had been longing to tell her, he felt quite stupefied. Cherry wondered what in the world had suddenly come over him. She began almost to fear that she must have offended him, only she could not possibly imagine how. And then she speculated whether it might not be that he had grown so wise and learned in his travels, as to make her seem dull and not worth talking to on his return. He had conversed pleasantly at tea-time certainly, but that was chiefly to her mother. Cherry began to feel sure that this alone could be the true explanation of his strange silence and absent brief replies. In a gentle sort of way her own manner grew somewhat cold as she thought thus; and she was quite glad at length to see her mother re-enter the room, after an absence of not five but fifteen minutes.

CHAPTER IX.

WIDOW TOWERS ENLARGES UPON THE PAST.

"WELL, have you been telling Cherry about your life in some of them outlandish parts where you've been?" asked Mrs. Towers, sitting down just opposite the two, and pulling out her knitting.

"What, Australia?" asked Jem, arousing himself with a great effort. "Why, no——"

"Because we're both as curious as can be," said Mrs. Towers. "Cherry talks of nothing else all day."

"Mother!" protested Cherry reproachfully.

"Well, of course I don't mean that exactly. But she and I *do* feel an interest in you, Jem, for the sake of old days."

"I'm sure you do," said Jem, rather mournfully, for he began to fear that this was indeed all, where he had hoped for more.

"You haven't told us yet how you came to hear about all the changes in your home," said Mrs.

Towers, who was inquisitive on that point, and had kept in her curiosity up to the extremest verge of endurance.

"No," Jem made answer thoughtfully. "I've been wondering if you couldn't tell me something more about my mother. I want to know how to set to work to find her."

"I don't believe you'll ever find her—not if you was to go to the North Pole itself," said Mrs. Towers energetically. "That man looked as if he was up to any sort of wickedness."

No doubt she spoke simple truth so far as concerned the North Pole, since Mrs. Woollatt was extremely unlikely to have taken up her abode at either of the Poles. However, the effect of such words was not cheering upon Jem, especially in his present mood.

"Mother," said Cherry quietly, "you didn't at all think that of Mr. Woollatt when you first saw him."

"I never liked him—never," said Mrs. Towers.

"Mother, don't you remember the first time you ever saw him, and how handsome you thought him, and how you wondered who he could be?"

"Handsome!" repeated Mrs. Towers. "Why, his hair was as red as red; and his beard was red too!"

"I wish you would tell me how it all came to pass," said Jem.

Cherry opened her lips and shut them again. She had no chance of telling the tale as she would have liked Jem to be told, with her mother sitting by.

"Of course I will, and with pleasure. Why didn't you ask me before?" said Mrs. Towers, smoothing down her dress, and settling herself for a regular talk. "Well, the first thing was that he married your mother, and turned her from Mrs. Collins into Mrs. Woollatt. And if she looked sorrowful as a widow, she looked sorrowfuller as a wife."

"That ain't the beginning, mother," said Cherry. "There was his coming to Ickledale."

"To be sure, so there was, and I'm forgetting. And then he married——"

"No, mother. Think of all that went on first."

"Deary me! Why, I am forgetting the best part of the tale—at least, I mean the worst. No, the worst was when he took her away; but it was bad enough all along. Nobody could think what Mr. Woollatt was come to Ickledale for, and he seemed a wonderful shut-up man about his own affairs. There was one or two folks who said a man of that name had lived in the place ever so many years before—I'm sure I don't know how many—a youngish man, who was a carpenter, and wasn't thought much of. But this Randall Woollatt gave himself such grand airs, and seemed so easy with his money, that we somehow thought at first he must have come of a better stock—not as we liked him, though. Only he might have gone on quiet enough, if it hadn't been for one or two things."

"What things?" Jem asked.

Mrs. Towers knitted and considered.

"Well, I don't really know which to put foremost, Jem. I shouldn't wonder now if Cherry was to laugh at me, but I don't know as it wasn't the red beard which made folks think about him first."

"I think, maybe, that made folks quicker to notice and remember him, and put two and two together about him," said Cherry's gentle voice shrewdly.

"That's just what I said," responded Mrs. Towers. "He seemed to be always about everywhere, with nothing in life to do, and there was a deal of wondering what he could be after. And then, when there got a whisper abroad that he was like to marry Mrs. Collins, folks pricked up their ears."

"But was anything positive known against him?" asked Jem.

"He never put his head inside of a church, nor any sort of a place of worship whatever," said Mrs. Towers. "That didn't speak over well for him; but it might have been his bringing-up, and he not knowing any better. Only there was a sort of a something about him—now wasn't there, Cherry?—which made a body dislike him. How ever your mother came to marry him——"

"How did she?" asked Jem.

"Ah! there's the question. He wasn't so mighty taking—but I suppose he made himself agreeable to her. Mr. Marchmont talked to her, but couldn't move her. I tried my hand too, thinking of you, Jem, but she was like a stock. 'Now, Mrs. Collins,' says I, 'it can't be really true, and William Collins,

the best man that ever lived, not six months in his grave.' And she said never a word, but began to cry. 'Ah, I knew you'd feel so,' says I. 'And you'll give him up, won't you, my dear? Think what William Collins would have thought of such a fellow!" And with that she fired up, and says she, 'What do you know about him?' And I told her I didn't like the looks of him. 'Maybe you don't, but I do,' says she, sharp enough. 'And he isn't going to marry you, so that's no matter.' I felt a bit flustered like, but I tried to answer her kindly. 'Come now, don't be huffed,' says I. 'It's only in a friendly way that I've come. You're too old, Mrs. Collins, to try the lads' and lasses' plan of marrying at haste and repenting at leisure. 'I'm in no haste,' says she. 'Deary me,' says I, 'why, the man hasn't been three weeks in Ickledale, and the talk is that it's all settled, and going to come to pass.' 'There's no end of gossip,' says she. 'Then it isn't true?' says I. 'It don't matter whether it's true or not,' says she; 'I just mean to please myself.' Well, it wasn't hard to guess what she meant by that. A lot more was said, but the more I talked to her the more she seemed set on her own way. We didn't think it would be so quick as it was though, for only one week after that day they were married. Nobody could stop them, you see, if they would do it."

"Of course not," assented Jem with a sigh.

"Being her own cottage, we thought they'd settle down there. Fact is, folks all say he just married

her because he had a mind to get possession of her nice little home and savings. He might have lived there with her comfortable enough too, between her earnings and his, if he'd had a mind. He hadn't though—anything of the sort. Maybe you've heard, Jem, of old Mr. Stanhope's illness a while back. I shouldn't wonder if you had."

"I've heard mention of it," said Jem. "Just before mother left Ickledale, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Towers nodded.

"It wasn't three days after they were married that Cherry went to the Towers, to take some fruit to Miss Stanhope. She don't do such a thing more than once in a way; but Miss Stanhope seems to like a sight of my Cherry now and then. Mrs. Stanhope was a right good friend to us, you know. Well, Cherry went. And when she came back she looked all scared and trembling. I couldn't think what had come over her. 'Cherry,' says I, 'are you ill, child, or what's happened?'"

"Mother, I thought you weren't going to tell about this to anybody," interposed Cherry.

"No; not to anybody as might happen to come by," said Mrs. Towers. "But Jem has a right to know all. Just hold your tongue, Cherry. I'm not going to have no secrets from Jem."

Cherry looked down and was silent, while Mrs. Towers continued:—

"'Cherry,' says I, 'what's happened?' 'Oh, mother,' says she, 'only think—Mr. Randall Woollatt

was at the Towers to-day, and Mr. Stanhope's been so ill.' And then she told me all about it—how he had made his way into the house as bold as if he was master there, and had called out in the hall that he wanted to speak to Mr. Stanhope—and how Miss Stanhope, who was standing talking to Cherry, turned as white as death—and how old Mr. Stanhope just then opened a door and came into the hall, and gave a sort of stagger back against the wall as if he 'd drop. He didn't drop though—not then. He came forward quite polite and meek, and shook hands, and took Mr. Woollatt into a room. And Cherry wanted to go away, but Miss Stanhope wouldn't let her. They could hear the deep voices going grumble-rumble through the wall, and Miss Stanhope grew whiter and whiter, till Cherry thought she would faint. And after ever so long, out the two came, and they were smiling and looking agreeable, only it was in a nasty sort of way, Cherry said. Mr Stanhope saw Mr. Woollatt off as polite as could be, and then he turned round, and he says, 'A worthy man with whom I 'm acquainted, my dear—just been disposing of a little of his property to me—a corner of land I have long wanted.' Cherry's told me the very words he said, till I know 'em off by heart. And Miss Stanhope looked up at him and said, in a sorrowful sort of a way, 'Oh, grandfather!' And Cherry says she never saw nothing like the scowl he gave her. Seems to me a scowl comes more natural to his face than a smile any day. But he didn't say another

word. He turned round and walked away; and just as he was going through a door he gave a stagger and fell down in a sort of fit. Cherry wanted to stay and help the young lady with him, but Miss Stanhope wouldn't let her. She said the old gentleman had had the same once before; and she only rang for the servants, and asked Cherry to send a doctor, on her way home. So Cherry came off, and we settled it was best not to talk about what she saw; and you're the first person I've told it to, Jem."

"Oh, no, mother," said Cherry, "you told Mr. Marchmont all about it, and——"

"Well, so I did; but Mr. Marchmont didn't take in a word of it all, my dear. And you do put me out so, Cherry, by stopping me in the middle. Where was I? Oh, yes. Well, the next thing we heard was that the old gentleman had been dangerously ill that night, but was better again, and that Mrs. Woollatt's cottage was sold to him, and was going to be pulled down."

"Poor old cottage!" broke from Jem.

"It did seem just downright grievous, knowing how William Collins had loved the place. And I went to see Mrs. Woollatt, and found her looking like a body half-stupefied. 'Why, Mrs. Woollatt, how's this?' says I. 'Your old home sold?' 'Yes, it's sold,' says she, as quiet as could be, but it wasn't a happy quiet. 'Ain't you going to live in it no longer?' says I. 'No,' says she. 'And where are you going?' says I. 'Anywhere,' says she; 'it don't

matter.' 'Deary me,' thinks I, 'what a picture of a happy bride, married not a week ago!' 'Now, Mrs. Woollatt,' says I coaxingly, 'you 'd best for your own sake speak out frank and open, and let your friends help you as best they can. Is he kind to you?' And she looks up quite steady in my face, and says, 'He 's kind to me, Mrs. Towers,' repeating my words, as if she was saying a lesson. 'Was it by your wish that he sold the cottage?' says I. 'A wife mustn't have wishes apart from her husband,' says she, in the same tone. 'Mr. Stanhope offered a good price, Randall says.' 'How much, Mrs. Woollatt?' asks I. 'That don't matter to you,' says she; and I don't believe she knew either. 'I wonder what Jem would say to all this?' says I. And with that she burst out crying, and how she did cry! It made my heart ache. But she wouldn't talk no more, and that was the last I saw of her."

"The last!" repeated Jem.

"The very last," said Mrs. Towers. "It was only the second morning after that, that a neighbour ran in and told me they were gone. Nobody knew no more. They 'd sent off their traps to the station after dark in the old donkey-cart, with poor half-witted Jacky to drive—you 'll remember him—and they must have walked after it themselves. Jacky knows in his puzzled way that they came up to him outside the station, and sent him back with his empty cart. And Mr. Marchmont tried to find out where they had gone, but he couldn't."

"No; he told me that himself," said Jem.

And then they sat and mused a little.

"It is a queer state of things," said Mrs. Towers, contemplating her knitting.

"I'm glad I know so much," said Jem; "but I do think Cherry's right, Mrs. Towers, and all this oughtn't to go further till we know what it means."

"Means?" repeated Mrs. Towers.

"Maybe Mr. Stanhope's illness was coming on beforehand, and Mr. Woollatt hadn't anything really to do with it," suggested Cherry.

"But you think it seemed as if he had?" said Jem softly.

"Only he *did* look frightened to see him at the first moment, and so did Miss Stanhope," responded Cherry.

"That's the point," said Jem. Well, the first thing I've got to do is to find out where my mother is."

Cherry gave a sort of little warning glance in the direction of Mrs. Towers, which reminded Jem that though the widow could keep her own counsel up to a certain point, it was best not to trust her too far with his intentions. So, though they had a good deal more talk, Jem was careful what he said.

But he found no opportunity to put the question he was longing to put until just before his departure. All the evening he could not get one moment alone with Mrs. Towers. Cherry's presence had never in

his life been unwelcome before, but now it seemed to haunt him, as also did the existence of that dreadful somebody, about whom Jem was burning to know. Who was he? Where was he? What had he to do with Cherry? Poor Jem!

At the very last moment there came a brief opportunity. Cherry disappeared, and Jem found himself at the door, with the word "Good-bye" upon Mrs. Towers' lips.

"Stop an instant," he whispered hoarsely. "I want to ask a question, Mrs. Towers. Did you say —about Cherry——"

"Eh?" said Mrs. Towers, peering at him in the moonlight through her spectacles, to discover the cause for the change in his voice. "What's the matter, Jem?"

"About Cherry," said Jem, endeavouring to speak with calmness. "Did you say——"

"Deary me, what a cold draught!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers. "I shall get my rheumatics back as sure as can be. Here, Cherry—Cherry—Jem wants to speak to you."

"No, no, indeed I don't," exclaimed Jem, in consternation, far too much agitated to think of anything else to say to her if she came. "Only just tell me one thing, Mrs. Towers——"

"I couldn't stay in this wind," said Mrs. Towers, shivering. "Cherry will tell you. Here, Cherry, Jem's in a hurry."

"Coming, mother," called the clear tones from

within; and Cherry came tripping out to the front door, whilst Mrs. Towers retreated into shelter.

But Jem was gone!

"Why, mother," said Cherry in astonishment, "he isn't here."

"Not there!" Why, what's come over the lad?" exclaimed Mrs. Towers.

Cherry said nothing. She went back very quietly into the sitting-room; and keen indeed must have been the ears to detect the thought which lay beneath her patient little sigh—

"Jem's a good deal spoilt by all his travels."

CHAPTER X.

MERVYN ENDEAVOURS TO MEND CHINA.

AT the very same hour when Cherry was pouring out tea for James Collins, and on that identical afternoon, Mervyn Stanhope, being seated at the table in the Towers parlour, was engaged in no greater or lesser occupation than that of mending one of the broken china ornaments from the mantelpiece. Ida sat opposite, watching him with childlike eyes from beneath her careworn woman's brow.

"The creature's head will stick at last. There! That 's something like. Now for an arm. I foresee a considerable amount of work in the way of household repairs."

"Grandfather never has anything mended, Mervyn."

"I 'm aware of that. Just as well that I should find something in the way of occupation ready to my hand."

"There isn't much to do here," said Ida wistfully "Mervyn——"

"Well?" said Mervyn abstractedly, as he endeavoured to fit a china arm into its socket.

"You won't get tired again of Ickledale, will you?"

"If it were not for you, I should be heartily tired of it already."

"After three days!" she said reproachfully.

"After three days," he repeated. "My dear child, I can't vegetate. I am used to a busy life."

"But you will find things to do."

"'T is to be hoped. I shall take up your education, to accomplish which I must also take up my own."

The girl's eyes shone. "But you don't really mean it?"

"Of course I do. Why not? Come, this is nearly done now. Think of its being left for years, as you say, to lie in a shattered heap, when a few touches of cement would set all right."

"Do you remember when it was broken?" asked Ida.

"No. When?"

"The day before you went away. I have not forgotten that. You broke it, and grandfather was angry; but when you were gone mother piled it up in a little heap, and she always dusted it herself after that evening."

Mervyn's touch grew suddenly reverent, and his eyes dim.

"I would not have mended it if I had known that," he muttered. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

He pulled it to pieces again—the cement being not yet dry—and restored it to its former place. Then he restlessly paced the room.

"I shall not be able to stand this long. Everything brings her back to me, or rather makes me feel how completely she is gone. And there is nothing in this aimless existence to distract one's thoughts. Ida, I tell you what, it is a miserable thing to have chosen my own path in life in opposition to everybody, and now—now to find myself——"

"At home," she ventured to suggest timidly.

"Home! My mother's presence made it home. This wretched old building is no home to me in itself. I only long to be away—back in Australia."

"Oh no; not to leave me behind."

"Would you come too?"

"Could I leave grandfather?" she asked.

Mervyn fairly groaned.

"There it is—tied hand and foot. I broke my fetters madly once, and now I have stepped back into them, and I feel as if I should break them again some day."

"Oh no!" she said with a sob. "You will wait—wait patiently, dear Mervyn. Things will come about differently some day."

"I'll wait awhile. One would think I ought to

have learnt patience before now. At all events, two things must happen before I can even dream of leaving Ickledale."

"What things?" she asked.

"Jem has to find his mother."

"I hope he will not," broke involuntarily from Ida.

"My dear!" said Mervyn.

"Do you think it likely that he will?"

"I hope so. I shall certainly further that end to the best of my ability."

"Mervyn, don't!" she said earnestly.

"What now?"

"Don't do it," she repeated fervently. "I can't explain, but do please take my advice."

Mervyn shook his head.

"Only don't do anything in a hurry," pleaded Ida. "Just wait a little while. Things may, perhaps, come more straight. But—you don't know—you may bring great trouble——"

"On whom?"

"On all of us, I suppose."

She put her face down into her hands and cried bitterly for a minute, but the tears were speedily checked.

"I 'm not going to be silly. Grandfather hates this sort of thing."

"I do not hate it, Ida; but I wish I could see you with your poor little mind at rest."

"Rest! Oh," sighed Ida wearily, "I don't look for that."

What was it which made certain words of deep and sweet solemnity, learnt long ago at his mother's knee in that very room, recur suddenly to Mervyn's thoughts? He gazed round him slowly, and could almost fancy he saw again the slight figure in the old arm-chair, with the little child in front; could almost fancy he heard again the two voices, one leading and one following:—

"Come unto ME, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you Rest."

Mervyn drew out of his pocket a tiny black Testament, much rubbed about the corners.

"Mother gave me this," he said in a low tone. "It has never been parted from me. I don't say I have read it anything like as often as I should. But I always have it about me, for her sake. Look here."

On the fly leaf those words were written in a trembling hand. And the word "Rest" was blotted, as if a tear had splashed down upon it while the ink was yet wet.

Ida lifted her eyes to her brother's face.

"Yes," she said presently, "that is what I want. I know it is. But how can I get it if I am going on doing what is wrong, or at least—no, not exactly that—but——"

"One particular wrong thing that ought to be stopped?" he asked seriously.

"Yes—no—perhaps—I can't tell you."

"A good many people would advise you better than I can do," he said.

"Oh no. I am so glad you have shown me that. I think I now shall be able to ask you my question soon, only not this afternoon. I don't feel like doing it."

"Poor little Ida! But, my dear child, don't misunderstand me. I meant to show you this, and that particular word recalled it to me. I wish I were a better man. I'm not all my mother wanted me to be."

Then, after a brief pause, during which he took the little Testament from Ida's hands, and put it back into its hiding-place, he said more lightly—

"I didn't tell you the second necessary event, before I could decide on my own plans."

"No. What is it?"

"Collins and Cherry, of course."

"Collins! Do you mean that he wants to marry her? Why, they were children——"

"I am certain the good fellow has a dream in his head."

"He will soon wake up," said Ida. "Mrs. Towers told me the other day that Cherry was as good as engaged to the new young schoolmaster. She seemed as proud and pleased as possible, and said it was quite a 'lift.' I know Addie Marchmont thinks him clever and good too."

"Bother his cleverness, if my friend Jem is turned over for it. Well, it is a good thing it has come before he sees more of Cherry. By-the-by, talking of the Marchmonts reminds me that you and I have

to go and see them. I want to make Miss Marchmont's acquaintance; Adela's, I ought to say."

"Do!" exclaimed Ida, starting up with unwonted eagerness. "Do come now, Mervyn. It was so tiresome your finding her out the day before yesterday. Do come."

"If you will escort me."

And five minutes later they started on their way. They had to traverse a considerable portion of Ickledale; but time being at present no valuable commodity with either of the two, they did not object to the length of the walk.

What a quaint little sleepy-hollow of a place it seemed to Mervyn's eyes! He was used to solitude in the backwoods and the bush, but there was something in the slumbrous placidity of this out-of-the-way yet civilized spot, altogether different from the great stillness of undisturbed Nature. Mervyn drew a deep breath once or twice, with a longing for the wider world's busy life.

And yet, but for certain circumstances, such a quiet interval following upon years of disappointments, strugglings, and hardships, could scarcely have failed to be welcome. It was the pressure of self-reproach for the past which rendered Mervyn restless and disposed to unhappiness.

But the past could never be recalled. The loved and wronged ones who had passed away could never be brought back.

This was a solemn truth for both Mervyn Stanhope

and James Collins. It is a terrible fact, and a fact too seldom realized, that a deed once done can never by any possibility be undone. A storm of remorse cannot sweep it aside. Rivers of tears cannot wash it away. Memory may grow dim, or may play a man false; but there the deed remains, whether good or evil, with its train of good or evil consequences working out their slow development unto the end. And who can say where that end lies? A single deed is quickly done, but the *end* of its consequences may lie ahead in the unknown depths of eternity.

It was enough just then for Mervyn to know that the consequences of his past wilfulness must abide with him through life. He could not indeed affirm that he had caused his mother's death. She might have died of the same illness, and at the same time, had he remained at home. But she would not then have died in vain and broken-hearted longing for her only son.

That which has been done cannot be undone. Yet the guilt may be so washed away by the atoning blood once shed on Calvary, that in the eyes of a holy God the very deed of evil shall be reckoned as though it had not been.

James Collins knew this truth in fact; Mervyn Stanhope knew it only in theory. James knew it in heart; Mervyn knew it only in head.

CHAPTER XI.

IDA AND MERVYN HOLD CONFIDENTIAL TALK.



NINE o'clock struck as Mervyn and his sister left the Vicarage garden, and began their homeward walk.

"Whew! it's dark," said Mervyn. "Not a star to be seen. I believe we are going to have rain. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind the rain," said Ida. "I hope grandfather won't be angry at our staying away so long."

"I'll take it all on myself, if he is."

"O no—please don't. I don't want him to be vexed with you."

"Well, never mind that now. How have you enjoyed your evening?"

"Very much, except for thinking of grandfather. And, Mervyn——"

He could not see the sudden colour in her cheeks, but he detected the shy anxiety in her voice through its would-be indifference, and he knew what was coming.

"Isn't Addie nice?"

"She seems very kind to you."

"Yes; but didn't you like her in herself?"

"Well—yes," Mervyn answered, with cruelly studied indecision. "Only not so much as her father. I'm perfectly charmed with Mr. Marchmont. Such absolute simplicity I never came across before."

"Isn't Addie like him?"

"She didn't strike me as being so."

"I always think her so pretty and sweet," said poor Ida wistfully.

"Just exactly what she is. We're going to have a downpour, Ida. I wish you had asked for an umbrella, but it can't be helped now. Yes, she is charmingly pretty and sweet. But don't be afraid, my dear child; I am quite free still, and ready to fall in love with your paragon young lady when I happen to come across her. Mere prettiness and sweetness won't do for me; I want more fire and depth and sparkle."

"Oh, but——" began Ida, in a dismayed tone, and there she stopped.

"Only I dare say she is much more fitted to be a friend to you than the sort of individual that I picture to myself," continued Mervyn, splashing through a puddle with great composure.

"What sort?" Ida wanted to know.

"Well, I don't precisely know how to describe her," said Mervyn, peering ahead doubtfully. "I don't see the turning I am looking for—no, I suppose this is

too soon. You want me to describe my private fancy model, eh? Don't you ever tell my secret to anybody then. It is a great proof of confidence, Ida. Let me see. She must be rather vague and misty in her outlines—tall, slight, and graceful—always dressed in white or pale blue. She must float along noiselessly rather than walk—must be so dignified as to keep everybody at a distance, and at the same time so bewitchingly gracious that everybody loves her. She must never laugh, but only smile sweetly; and when she speaks—which shouldn't be too often—her voice must sound like a silver bell."

Ida sighed.

"Did you ever see anybody like that, Mervyn?"

"Never," responded Mervyn with decision. "But I am waiting till I do."

Ida sighed again. He certainly had not described Addie Marchmont, and her hopes waxed dim.

Rain pattered fast around them, and the evening was so dark that they had to proceed with caution on this unlighted path. Ida clung trustfully to her brother's arm, leaving the matter of guidance entirely to him. Presently he took her over a stile, that they might make a short "field-cut"; and as they were walking through a sticky compost of mud, Mervyn heard a low voice beside him say—

"I 'm going to ask you a question."

Mervyn signified his readiness to hear and respond.

"I want you to tell me this"—Ida spoke with thoughtful slowness—"When a person knows of a

wrong thing that some other person is doing, and when she—he, I mean—has nothing exactly to do with that wrong thing, but has found it out in a wrong way by accident, ought she—he, I mean—to make it known, or to keep the secret?"

"My dear Ida, you take away my breath. It sounds like a question in algebra. Let x stand for the first person——"

"Mervyn, don't laugh," said Ida beseechingly.

"I really won't if I can help it, but you have muddled my brains to that degree—let me think! If a person has done a wrong thing, and another person has done another wrong thing, and the second person becomes aware of the first wrong thing which the first person has done, ought each to tell tales of the other, or ought they both to hold their tongues? Have I stated your proposition clearly? Why, I think I should recommend them to hold their tongues."

"Oh no, you don't understand in the least. It doesn't matter."

"Can't you make me understand?" asked Mervyn, hearing a sound of real distress in the tones. "Come, Ida—Ida, my dear child, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I 'm not—you haven't—it 's not that," sobbed Ida, stumbling over the rough path, with her face pressed down upon his arm. "Only I do so long for someone to help me, and I thought you would be able."

"Perhaps I could, if you could make the matter clearer. I promise not to laugh."

But she only walked on in silence.

"One thing is certain, Ida," he said presently: "the straightforward path is the best and safest."

"I don't know which is the straightforward path."

"And you can't tell me what your difficulty really is?"

"Oh no!—not yet."

"Well, then, suppose you try to forget it. Come, here we are at the garden gate at last, and the rain has stopped. By-the-by, I wonder you don't put your question to Adela Marchmont, or her father?"

"Oh no! I couldn't indeed—indeed I couldn't."

"Suppose we talk about it more some other day. I'm rather damp now, and so are you," suggested Mervyn, not sorry to defer a discussion wherein he felt his wisdom might be at fault; and the next moment he exclaimed, "Ha! Collins. Hallo!"

"Yes, sir," said James, coming up through the bushes, "I'm just come back."

"Had a pleasant time, my good fellow?"

"Yes, sir." Jem's tone was by no means enthusiastic.

"Cherry as pretty as ever?"

"Yes," Jem answered, somewhat low.

"Ida, suppose you run in?" said Mervyn, but she held his arm fast.

"Please come too, Mervyn. I don't know what grandfather will say."

Nobody could see anybody's face, and Mervyn felt

that the fact he had to tell was better made known without delay.

"I say, Jem."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not going to joke you any more on that point. Of course you know about Cherry?"

"Know what?" There was a catch in Jem's breath.

"She's as good as engaged to the young schoolmaster.

A pause, and then Jem said only, "Thank you, sir."

"Perhaps she wouldn't be worthy of you, after all, Jem?"

"She's worth anything!" said Jem, firing up slightly.

"Ida, do go in," whispered her brother.

Ida was dreaming over her own concerns, and heard with a start, but this time she moved away towards the front-door. Mervyn's hand came hastily on Jem's shoulder.

"You don't mind much, do you? After all, you and she are almost strangers now."

"It don't seem like being so," muttered Jem. "Yes, sir, it's—it's—only giving up another dream like!"

"And a dream is a very unsubstantial thing. You won't care in a little while for having lost it. Something better may come to you." But there Mervyn's tone suddenly changed. "You do care though.

And if I had come home when you first pressed me, you might have been in time. I do believe I 'm born to be a source of misery to every one that loves me."

"No, sir," said Jem steadily. "There 's One above that disposes events, and I must be content to take them as He wills. It 's not for me to murmur."

"I wish I were half as good as you," Mervyn said impetuously, as he had often said before. Then, with a sigh, he turned towards the house, and found the front-door ajar. Ida was waiting inside.

"Grandfather opened it to me himself," she whispered; "and he said we must tell him beforehand next time we meant to stay away all the evening. He said he did not mean me to learn your spirit of independence. He didn't say much, but he was angry."

"There was nothing to be angry about," said Mervyn laconically. "Go to bed now, Ida."

Ida escaped, but Mervyn came across his grandfather, and some hot words passed between them. With the strongest desire to keep the peace on either side, those two untamed wills could not encounter without jarring. This first dispute was not likely to be the last.

CHAPTER XII.

HICKS COMES TO GRIEF.

IT happened one day, about a fortnight or three weeks after their first arrival in Ickledale, that James Collins, choosing to find for himself a secluded corner of the low churchyard wall, and sitting thereon to ruminate, was unexpectedly joined by Mervyn Stanhope, proceeding just the other way.

"Pleasant afternoon, Jem," was the first remark. "What took you off in such a hurry?"

"You said you didn't want me, sir."

"Well, I believe I do now."

James looked ready, as he always did, for anything that Mervyn might require.

"I say," observed Mervyn, breaking off one or two loose stones from the top of the wall and flinging them away—"I say, Collins——"

"Yes, sir."

"How long is it since your last visit to Mrs. Towers?"

"I 've not been a second time."

"You have not!"

"I didn't see the good," said James, flushing.

"But I say you are throwing away your only chance."

"Chance of what, sir?"

"Cherry Towers. The fact is, I made a little blunder. I thought my sister said they were actually engaged, whereas it seems she only heard they were as good as engaged."

James gave a quick glance up and away.

"Then it's most like to have gone further before this."

"I declare, you take things composedly. But you haven't really been depending on that one word of mine all this time?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Towers said something about it herself, and one or two others have spoken of it as certain. It don't seem to me that I 've any call to be going in Cherry's way just now."

"I 've no patience with that Hicks," said Mervyn wrathfully. "Hicks! Hicks! Cherry Hicks! What a horrible surname!"

"The name don't matter much," said James soberly.

"The man does though. I 've no patience with him. Have you seen him yet? No? Well, he 's down yonder—strolling up and down the path below the Vicarage garden. I saw him as I came."

Down went another small shower of stones from Mervyn's hand, and a gentle voice below called—

"Come, my good boys, look out, please!"

"Mr. Marchmont! I beg your pardon," exclaimed Mervyn. "I had no idea any one was there."

Mr. Marchmont gave a little nod of forgiveness and passed onwards to the gate, whence he found his way to the two young men.

"I'm glad to see you both—very glad. It looks almost like old days to see you on this wall together."

"I'm caught at my old trick of stone-throwing," laughed Mervyn. "Sit down, pray, Mr. Marchmont."

"It is beautiful out here—so peaceful," said the old clergyman dreamily. "By-the-by, I had something to say. Mervyn, you are rather—well, rather a weight upon my mind just now."

"*I* am?" repeated Mervyn.

"Yes. To tell the truth, I don't exactly know what is to become of you."

"To tell the truth, I don't exactly know either," responded Mervyn.

"It is a serious question. I am afraid for you. A young man, not yet thirty, with the prospect of ample wealth, and literally with no aim or occupation in life. My dear boy, there never was a position more dangerously open to the entrance of evil.

"I have some safeguards," said Mervyn soberly; for the simple-hearted solicitude of the good old man was such as to check his frequent inclination to make light answers.

"Safeguards! Eh?" said Mr. Marchmont.

"Ida's education," observed Mervyn. "That is my present aim, and it threatens to keep me pretty busy, since it includes the brushing-up of my own. We were two hours over a book of English history this morning."

"I 'm glad, very glad, to hear you are really doing anything," said Mr. Marchmont earnestly.

"That 's safeguard number one. Then as to the wealth, *is* there much?"

"I wish there were not," said the clergyman with much emphasis. "I wish it with all my heart. It has ruined your grandfather."

"Well, we don't gain much good from it at present."

"Aye, but I dread the day when it will come into your power. My dear boy, if you don't give it back to God, and yourself with it, when that day comes it may prove a curse to you likewise."

"I hope not," said Mervyn seriously. "Here is my other safeguard."

He laid his hand on Collins' shoulder.

"'Mischievous Jem,' you know. He used to lead me into mischief, and now he keeps me out of it."

"Aye, but Jem can't keep your heart," said Mr. Marchmont, as Collins shook his head.

"And apart from the safeguards I have mentioned there 's yet another," said Mervyn. "I don't believe I can stand six months of this life, and I expect I

shall be off to Australia one day—at the conclusion of some family explosion."

"Difficulties with your grandfather again! eh?" said Mr. Marchmont, looking grieved. "The old lesson of submission still unlearnt!"

"What would you expect of me?" asked Mervyn, half sullenly. "A man accustomed to knock about over the world can't be in leading-strings like an infant."

"I would live in peace at any cost, if I were you —save the cost of principle. Has not sorrow enough been worked already by this sort of thing? Your mother!"

"That's it!" muttered Mervyn brokenly, looking in the other direction. "I don't know how to live here without her. But I'll try."

"I am sure you will. It is only right for Ida's sake, and your grandfather's."

Mervyn sighed, and was silent.

"Good afternoon, Hicks," said Mr. Marchmont pleasantly.

Mervyn's feelings underwent a sudden change, and he frowned and held up his head, as a fresh-looking young man came up the path, book in hand.

"My new schoolmaster, Mr. Hicks," observed Mr. Marchmont, glancing at the others. "Enjoying a little quiet time for reading, eh, my friend? Just what *I* love to do. Well, we won't disturb you now."

"It's a pleasant day. Good evening, sir," said Hicks, as he walked on.

"A very capable young fellow—keeps the boys in beautiful order," said Mr. Marchmont. "They say he has some thoughts of marrying, and, if reports be true, he has made a most sensible choice. That nice Cherry Towers, you know; she was quite a friend of yours in childhood, Collins. I have a little dream that she may do, by-and-by, for the girls' school-mistress, when the present one leaves Ickledale. But I mustn't count my chickens before they are hatched."

It sounded a most comfortable and satisfactory arrangement, only James felt like somebody left out in the cold. *He* had nothing to do with it all. And it must be confessed, that at the first sight of his smooth-faced young rival, certain strongly unchristian sensations of anger and repulsion came sweeping up in his heart, threatening, unless speedily beaten back, to break forth in some shape of evil.

"I hope the fellow is worthy of her," said Mervyn gloomily, in sympathy for Jem.

"In hope so too; but I see no reason to doubt. He is a truly excellent young man, just suited to our friend Collins! I should not wonder to see the two great friends some day," said Mr. Marchmont, with a smiling glance at James's troubled face.

"I shouldn't wonder to see nothing of the sort," growled Mervyn, happily too low to be overheard.

"Hallo!" what's all that noise about?" exclaimed Mr. Marchmont, starting up.

The two others sprang to their feet simultaneously. Distant shouts and cries, with the sound of furiously galloping hoofs, came up through the air.

"A horse running away—look! and no rider," said Mervyn breathlessly. "He'll be on the other side of the church in a moment."

The younger men dashed across the churchyard, followed less expeditously by Mr. Marchmont. They were just in time to see the animal careering wildly round the bend in the road, while towards that same bend, and in the very middle of that same road, a man was quietly walking, with his eyes bent upon an open book.

"It's Hicks! Hicks! Ahoy, man!—out of the way!" shouted Jem wildly, as he flung himself over the wall, and side by side with Mervyn rushed towards the scene of action.

Too late! Hicks lifted his eyes indeed, and looked round; but at the same instant he went down like a bulrush before the storm.

Mervyn caught the trailing bridle of the horse, and was dragged some distance at his utmost speed before he could check its career. James hurried forward with quickly-beating heart, to bend over the silent figure stretched in the dust—three seconds before full of health and energy. Was this the rival against whom a flood-tide of bitter hate had striven in his soul? No rival now, to be spurned, but only a

suffering brother-man, to be pitied and helped. How James thanked God that hour that he had at least done what he could to save him—though the warning cry had been in vain.

And then Mr. Marchmont came panting up.

"Poor fellow! Poor fellow! This is grievous indeed. But he isn't dead, Collins—he isn't dead. We must have him home quickly. Poor fellow!"

CHAPTER XIII.

CHERRY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK.

CHERRY was hard at work that afternoon ironing clothes in the tiny kitchen, looking somewhat more heated and worried the while, than her occupation would have seemed to warrant. And Widow Towers, seated hard by, had just been letting out her ideas concerning somebody or something with such vigour that the hue of her face, in consequence thereof, rivalled a peony in bloom.

"I wouldn't mind, mother. It don't matter, after all," said Cherry, in a peaceable tone.

"I do mind, though, and I mean to mind too," responded Mrs. Towers energetically. "Don't matter, indeed! I think it does matter, and a pretty good deal! I believe you'd make out, if you could, that folks needn't mind anything at all in this life. It's all the same with you whatever goes wrong—always, 'It don't matter,' or 'We needn't mind.' I declare, Cherry, I do wonder sometimes whether you

wouldn't say them words if I was laid in my coffin."

"O mother!" said Cherry reproachfully.

"Then you needn't talk now about not minding. Don't tell me you don't mind. An old friend as we haven't seen for years, and he makes believe to come back just as if he was the same as ever, and seems as pleased like as I'd wish to see him, and then never to come near us again, never once, all this while!—if that isn't forsaking his friends, I don't know what is!"

"Mother, we don't know what the reason is."

"Reason! He can't have any reason, except that he don't care to come. Reason, indeed! I don't mean to say it's surprising. He's a travelled man now, and thinks himself too grand for us poor folks. No, and I wouldn't mind either, if it wasn't that he'd come in that once and made believe to be so nice. Why, he was just exactly like what he used to be, only he looked older; and he said he'd mend that chair for me too, and he's never done it."

"I wish you'd never asked him," said Cherry hastily.

"Wish I'd never asked him! I'm ashamed of you, Cherry. As if one mightn't ask a kindness of a friend, if he's a friend worth having. I never did see a girl so ready to grumble at her poor old mother—never," repeated Mrs. Towers.

"I didn't mean that, mother," said Cherry gently, trying very hard, poor girl, to be patient; for these moods of her mother's were hard to bear.

"But I don't mean to have nothing more to do with James Collins—no, not if he was to come and ask me on his bended knees," continued Mrs. Towers grandly, as she fanned her flushed face with the corner of her apron. "A man as can neglect old friends like that isn't worth a thought. If we're not good enough for him, he can keep away and welcome. I'm not going to trouble my head about the matter, I can tell him; so he needn't think it."

This decision was somewhat contrary to the declaration of some minutes earlier; but Mrs. Towers' mind was not unlike the weathercock on the church tower—disposed to point both north and south within the same half-hour on gusty days.

"I was afraid Jem wasn't quite himself that first evening," said Cherry quietly, as she smoothed a ruffled collar.

"So was I," assented Mrs. Towers. "Trust me to see through a body! There was a look in his face that warned me. I'm pretty quick to know when a young man is going wrong. Fact is, he's ashamed to come among his old friends. I shouldn't wonder if he's taken to gambling."

"Mother, I didn't mean that at all," said Cherry uneasily.

"It's a dreadful thing if he has," said Mrs. Towers. "It never comes to good if a man's afraid to come among old friends, and can't look 'em in the face. It struck me about Jem now that he had a down sort of look. When he was sitting in the arm-

chair, I couldn't help noticing how he didn't look straight at neither you nor me, but kept staring on the ground. I 'm always sorry to see a young man ashamed of himself. Depend upon it, he 's no good, and we 're well quit of him. There always was a deal of mischief in Jem Collins, and it isn't to be wondered at he 's turned out as he has."

"Mother, you don't know one bit of harm in Jem, except that he don't come to see us often," said Cherry earnestly.

"That 's enough for me!" responded Mrs. Towers, nodding her head sagely. "I know! You 're young, and you don't understand. *I* know well enough. He 's gone all wrong, depend upon it, and he 'll never come to no good."

Cherry ironed away silently, and wished her mother wouldn't talk so of poor Jem. She had felt a little indignant with him herself, but this was going too far.

"I 've something else to say to you, Cherry."

"Yes, mother."

"It 's about Mr. Hicks."

Cherry made no answer.

"He 's a nice man and a good man. He isn't the sort of man to forsake old friends."

If that was all Mrs. Towers had to say, Cherry felt that no answer was needed. It might be true; but the fact was not proved, Mr. Hicks being comparatively a new acquaintance. Cherry was aggrieved at the hit to Jem implied in the sentence.

"He's coming to speak to you this evening, Cherry. It won't do to go on putting him off no longer. It isn't fair, and it isn't right, and I told him he might come."

Cherry's cheeks were dyed with crimson.

"Mother!"

"You'll have to give him an answer. And you know what I want. I'm a poor, lone widow, and you'll make me happy for the rest of my life. I did used to think, once upon a time, that maybe Jem Collins was to be the son-in-law to look after me in my old age, and to take care of me. And now I see I was mistaken, I'm glad to know there's another."

Cherry could not help feeling as if her own happiness were rather put out of the question. She went on ironing with a hasty hand.

"Ferdinand Hicks is as modest and sensible a man as ever breathed," said Mrs. Towers. "He don't puff himself up, and yet he's got proper self-respect."

"I don't care for self-respect," said Cherry, feeling perverse. "Most people have a deal too much of it."

"Cherry, I'm ashamed of you," said Mrs. Towers, using her favourite formula. If you're going to give way to that sort of temper, you'll just—— My! you're burning that collar."

Cherry looked contrite, and went on with her work more carefully; only her hand shook so that she could scarcely grasp the iron. She did wish she

could get away somewhere to think quietly; but such an idea never seemed to occur to her mother for a moment, and Cherry felt cowardly about asking leave. She was greatly perplexed what to do. Mr. Hicks was undoubtedly a very desirable young man. He had spoken to Mrs. Towers about Cherry six weeks before, but Cherry had protested that she did not know him, and had begged that the question might be put aside. And now he had come forward again.

It would not do to keep the poor man hanging in suspense. Cherry knew that very well. She quite saw that it would not be just to him; and she could not say that she did not know him, since he had been in and out perpetually of late. Cherry liked Mr. Hicks—liked him very much indeed—only—— Well, she did not exactly know what that little "only" in her heart meant. True, she had once indulged in a silly childish fancy about the big handsome boy, Jem Collins, who had been so devoted to her years before. Somehow she had once thought nobody could ever be to her quite what he was. But now that he had returned she was undeceived. He was nothing to her, and she was nothing to him. And here were a happy home and a kind husband awaiting her—if only she would accept them. Why shouldn't she? How very foolish it would be to refuse!

"I wish I could have seen Jem once more."

That thought pushed its way into her mind suddenly. Cherry started, and smothered it back as

quickly. But, strange to say, at that very moment the bell rang.

"I'll go, mother," said Cherry, glad of an excuse to escape.

She put down the iron, and ran to the front door. And there stood Jem Collins.

Cherry's flushed cheeks took a deeper dye, and a half exclamation of pleasure escaped her. And then she grew silent, for he looked grave and cold, and showed no particular gladness.

"I want one word with you, Cherry," he said quietly. "I have brought a message from Mr. Marchmont."

"Shall I call mother?" asked Cherry.

"No, never mind about that; I must be off again almost directly. Mr. Marchmont wanted you to be told something, and he didn't know who to send but me."

Why shouldn't Jem be sent? Cherry wondered. Why should he thus wish to keep away? Cherry was so absorbed with this thought for the moment, as to have no anxiety or curiosity concerning his news.

"Will you come into the parlour?" she asked.

Jem hesitated, and then followed her over the threshold. He wished to be just friendly and natural in manner to Cherry, but the fear of betraying his real feelings made him overact his part, and he was so stiffly and disagreeably repellent, poor fellow, that Cherry's own bearing towards him altered likewise. It was a hard task to Jem—this errand upon which

he had been sent. But Mervyn having rushed impulsively away for the doctor, he had no choice but to carry out Mr. Marchmont's wish.

"There has been an accident," he said. "A horse ran away, and knocked down somebody. He is a good deal stunned, I am afraid. I believe—he—is a friend of you and Mrs. Towers—and you will be sorry——"

"Who is it?" asked Cherry.

"Mr. Hicks, the schoolmaster. The horse galloped over him. I am afraid he is a good deal hurt."

Cherry's "Oh!" was dismayed. Her flushed cheeks grew pale and her little heart fluttered.

"I am sorry for you," said Jem coldly. "If I can do anything——"

"No, thank you," said Cherry, in a half-bewildered way. "Only—please—is he badly hurt?"

"I don't know exactly. The doctor had not come. I 'm afraid some bones are broken, and he has had a bad blow on the head. He was not conscious when I came away; but his mother had seen the accident, and ran out, and when we had him back in the cottage, she said he was coming to—to—here, I mean —this afternoon—and she would rather you should hear of the accident through a friend. She was afraid you would be startled."

Slowly and icily, with a good deal of hesitation, dropped the words from Jem's lips. A sob struggled in Cherry's throat, and tears filled her eyes.

"Mrs. Hicks is always so kind," she murmured. "Thank you. It 's—it 's—very dreadful."

"It is," said Jem. "At least—I hope it will prove nothing serious. I can do nothing for you?"

"No, thank you."

"Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye," said Cherry, without lifting her eyes.

Jem went out of the room, and out of the house, and Cherry buried her face in her apron and sobbed most bitterly. But she didn't half know why she cried. And when Mrs. Towers came in, and heard the news, and said, "Don't tell me now, Cherry, that you ain't sure whether you care for Mr. Hicks," Cherry felt somehow that her mother had not fathomed the matter at all.

"How did Jem behave?" asked Mrs. Towers, severely.

"Oh, mother, not like himself. He was *so* strange," sobbed Cherry, feeling, though she did not acknowledge it to herself, that there was the real heartbreak, and that poor Mr. Hicks, after all, had not much to do with her tears. And yet she was very sorry, very sympathizing, about him too.

CHAPTER XIV.

MERVYN LEARNS THE IMPORTANCE OF A CERTAIN VIRTUE.



"EM!" exclaimed Mervyn, in astonishment. He had summoned the doctor to the injured schoolmaster, returning with him to hear his report of the case, and thence finding his way homewards. Proceeding through the rough Towers shrubbery, termed by courtesy a garden, he came suddenly upon James Collins, seated on a tree-stump, buried in thought.

"Jem?" repeated Mervyn. And then he sat down upon a second tree-stump exactly opposite, before Jem had time to rise.

"How is Hicks, sir?" asked Jem, attempting no explanation of his unwonted position.

"Unconscious still. Collar-bone and right arm broken, which are bad enough in themselves, but the blow on the head is worse. The doctor simply won't say anything about it at present. Can't possibly tell, he says. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to think, sir."

"Mr. Marchmont told me he had sent you to carry the news to Cherry Towers."

"Yes," said James.

"I say, Jem, here's an opportunity for you!"

Whether or no Mervyn spoke satirically, Jem did not know. He lifted his eyes to look Stanhope in the face, and simply said—

"Don't *you* act tempter to me, please, sir. My own heart is quick enough at that."

"Tempter! Eh? How? What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking the whole question over," said Collins deliberately. "You see, I know more how matters stand now than I did."

"How do they?" asked Mervyn.

"There's nought settled yet," said Jem slowly. "Mr. Hicks has been after Cherry ever since he came to Ickledale, and awhile ago he spoke to Mrs. Towers, but she bid him wait. He's seen a deal of Cherry since, and he's been hopeful, and Mrs. Hicks don't seem to have a doubt but what she'll marry him. And he spoke again to Mrs. Towers last night, and she told him he was to go and talk to Cherry this afternoon. And now—this has come."

"Did you know as much before you took the message to Cherry?" asked Mervyn abruptly.

"No, sir. I'm glad I didn't. I went back to see if I could be any further help, and Mrs. Hicks began to talk to me, crying about her son, and let it all out."

"Well?" said Mervyn.

"And I've been thinking," said Jem slowly, "how I'd wish a man to act, if I was in Mr. Hicks' place this minute."

"The road is open to you now, Jem," said Mervyn, in a peculiar tone—not a tone of hearty encouragement, as Jem knew.

"Ay, it's open," said Jem. "Mr. Mervyn, will you answer me this question, please? If you were in my position, could *you* go after Cherry, taking advantage of Hicks' illness?"

Mervyn's reply came without hesitation.

"No, Jem! As a gentleman and a man of honour I could not. It would be impossible!"

"And I too, as a man of honour, could not!" said Jem. "I hope it would be impossible to me."

"But—you said you were glad you had not known before you went there?"

"Ay, for I might have been betrayed into letting out my feelings under the first excitement," said Jem. "I'm not quick at seeing the whole of a matter, sir, and I shouldn't have had a moment for thought. I've had it now, and I mean to wait."

"If you could have come to any other resolution, as things now stand, I should have been disappointed in my old friend," said Mervyn cheerfully. "After all, Jem, we're not sure what Cherry's answer will be."

"No, sir; but I don't feel much doubt," said Jem.

"Well, we shall see. By the bye, Jem, we don't get any answer to the advertisements. I wonder whether your mother ever sees them."

Jem shook his head a little. "I haven't much hope from them," he said. "Whatever took her away seems pretty likely to keep her away."

"That 's too wild a guess for your sensible brain. You don't know what did take her away," said Mervyn, as they rose and went towards the house.

James pondered a little.

"I 've been wondering whether I ought to tell you something which I heard in a sort of confidence," he said. "But I don't see that I 'll be wrong, if you won't make it known to others, sir, without my consenting."

"All right—I promise," was Mervyn's hasty answer; and Jem began to repeat the facts which he had heard from Widow Towers on his first arrival. Gradually their steps slackened till they stood still in the middle of the path, with the tangled brushwood on either side, and dusk deepening around them. Some slight exclamations broke from Mervyn.

"Why in the world didn't you tell me all this before?" he asked at the end.

"Cherry didn't seem to think we 'd a right to spread it. But I 've come to the conclusion that you ought to know."

"Ought! Of course I ought. But what does it mean? I 'm bewildered. Why, Jem! what if my grandfather knows where your mother is?"

"It don't follow that he does," said Jem. "It don't even seem to be likely—but it's just possible.

"I shall certainly tax him with it."

"Sir, that won't do at all. I was told in a sort of confidence, as they say, and we might get the Towers into trouble."

"Stuff! Trouble! What could he do to them? And who is to know who told me?"

"If you say anything about that scene, he can't help guessing that you must have heard through Miss Stanhope or Cherry, sir—nobody else except Mr. Woollatt being present. And you would have to shield Miss Stanhope."

"Ay, from his anger, for she in his power. But Cherry isn't in his power?"

"Maybe so, and may be not, sir. Folks have more power over one another than we often think. Anyway, you had better, please, ask her leave first, or let me ask it, to make use of what she said," returned Jem steadfastly. "You promised, sir, you know."

"More's the pity!" and Mervyn laughed. "You are frightened at a shadow; but I must not be surprised where Cherry is concerned. Well, will you consent to this? If I speak about your mother, and ask him point-blank if he knows anything, without referring to that particular scene, there could be no harm done, eh?"

"If you are bent upon it, sir, I suppose you must," said James unwillingly. "But I doubt if you'll gain anything, and we might do better after a little waiting."

Impatient-spirited Mervyn had, however, no notion

of submitting to needless delay. He went indoors, and found the old gentleman direfully displeased at his protracted absence. So much displeased, in fact, was Mr. Stanhope, that he refused to vouchsafe Mervyn a single glance, but scowled gloomily over his book, turning a deaf ear to all details of the day's adventure—if such the unhappy occurrence might be called. Ida supplied her brother with tea, and then, at a whisper from him, disappeared.

Mervyn could hardly have chosen a worse time to press an unwelcome question. He knew it himself, but his self-control was not equal to the task of voluntary waiting.

"Grandfather ——?"

A grunt of assent answered him.

"If you are not busy, I want a word."

The old man's glittering eyes looked straight at Mervyn, over the top of the book, but that was all.

"We can find out nothing at all about Jem Collins' mother—Mrs. Woollatt."

"Very likely!" said Mr. Stanhope curtly.

"I want to know whether you could not help us in the matter?"

"Humph?"

"I thought you might be able," said Mervyn.

"You did, did you? Ho! Ha! ha!"

The harsh laugh was painfully devoid of mirth, and the muscles of the old man's face worked strangely.

"It is a thing which concerns Collins' happiness," said Mervyn gravely.

"That man is a pest—a perfect nuisance—about the house!"

"Grandfather!" Mervyn flushed scarlet, as the indignant word burst from him.

"Well, go on! I've no time to lose," said Mr. Stanhope.

"If Collins leaves the house, I leave too."

"I believe you have told me this before," said the old gentleman with irritating coolness.

Mervyn strode to the other end of the room and back again. "I tell you what, grandfather——"

"Eh? Hallo!" said Mr. Stanhope, setting up his eyebrows.

"I believe you will drive me away soon. And if my faithful Collins is nothing but a pest and a nuisance, the sooner we go the better."

"If you have done talking, perhaps you will let me finish my reading," said Mr. Stanhope.

Mervyn was surprised into marching tempestuously out of the room and back to the garden. There he encountered Jem, and at the same moment came to his senses.

"Jem, I'm a perfect blockhead!" was his exclamation.

"Well, sir, folks mayn't all think alike about that," said composed Jem, biting a piece of straw.

"I've gone and asked the question, and let him put me into a passion, so that I forgot about the

answer, and came away without it. I really do believe he did it on purpose. I've a mind to go back."

"If you do, sir, it will stop all chance for the future," said Jem earnestly. "I do beg you to wait awhile, and not do anything more in a hurry."

"You've a right to speak if any one has." And Mervyn sighed. "You patient fellow! O Jem! if I had but learnt self-control in my boyhood!"



CHAPTER XV.

IDA'S SECRET SEEMS NEAR DISCLOSURE.

THE endurance of James Collins was put in no slight degree to the test. Day after day passed by, and still Ferdinand Hicks lay senseless on his sick-bed, in no immediate danger, yet showing small symptoms of mending. Day after day, too, Jem kept studiously away from Widow Towers' cottage, and endeavoured to occupy himself cheerfully elsewhere. But the self-denial of this course of conduct was not small. The more he was debarred from intercourse with Cherry, the more he thirsted for it.

Days grew into weeks, and yet there came to the sufferer no change. The doctor spoke of recovery, but he spoke gravely. Some whispered that he feared permanent injury to the poor young man's intellect, but nobody knew whence the idea had arisen, so it might have been only gossip. Others noted Cherry Towers' depressed look and waning

colour, and said how sad it was that the accident had come just then, and how evident was her feeling towards him. Cherry always repudiated any particular cause for interest on her part, except that he had been "very kind" to her. But, as the Ickledale gossips remarked, that was only natural, since he had not yet spoken openly of his feelings. It had become pretty well known now, through garrulous Mrs. Hicks, that her son had meant to speak.

Nobody knew what Cherry's answer would be, though many were forward enough with conjectures and assertions. Cherry's own mother did not know. She had tried to find out by means of certain "supposings," and Cherry had once answered dejectedly, "I suppose I shall have to, mother." But another day she had said, "Mother, I *can't* have him;" and yet a third time, when, in consequence of those words, Mrs. Towers was lamenting her own unbefriended position and Cherry's perversity, Cherry had sobbed, "Mother, I mean to do as you wish." So Mrs. Towers really did not know what to think.

The long illness took a turn at length, and sense came slowly back to the poor bewildered head. Mr. Hicks was a good way off yet from anything in the way of love-making, but the doctor said he was certainly getting better.

Cherry tried to be glad, and thought she really was glad. Yet, somehow, her cheeks grew paler instead of rosier, and she had not looked so worried and

harassed at the very worst of the illness as she did now. Sometimes she felt as if she must say "No," and yet she wanted to say "Yes." She knew it would please her mother, and she liked Mr. Hicks, and was pitifully disposed towards him, on account of his sufferings; and Jem Collins' persistent absence roused a certain resentment in her gentle heart, and Cherry didn't at all understand her own feelings as a whole. So she was drifting quietly, albeit reluctantly, into the path which her mother meant her to travel. Cherry had, at last, pretty well made up her mind that when the question came, which she knew she had to expect, her own answer must be in the affirmative.

Autumn was now coming on apace, though the oppressive weather seemed rather to belong to summer. One afternoon Mervyn and his sister had been bending together over books for a considerable time, finding no little interest in the subject of their joint study. Ida sat up at length, however, and gave vent to a tired-out sigh.

"I wish you would take me for a walk, Mervyn."

"To be sure I will. What's the matter?"

"I don't know. I only feel stupid."

"Get your hat, and we'll soon shake you into a livelier state of mind."

The "hat," with gloves and scarf accompanying, was speedily forthcoming, and they started for one of the long indefinite rambles which the two had often enjoyed together of late. Ida did not seem so much in the mood for pleasure as usual. She hung upon

his arm rather heavily, declined to walk fast, and after some time asked to sit down.

"Beaten already! Why, Ida!"

"I think there must be thunder about; it always makes me feel like this."

"It looks uncommonly like a thunderstorm, so perhaps you are right. I'm glad there is a rational reason, for I began to be afraid you were poorly."

"Do you not think we had better go back, if a storm is coming?" asked Ida.

"If you like, but there's no hurry. Come and rest here a little first."

He sat down on a grassy bank, and she leant against him.

"You are sure it is nothing worse than possible thunder?" he said, looking solicitously at her white cheeks.

"I don't know—no—at least—I get worried some days, Mervyn."

"What about?"

"Oh, the old perplexity," she said, sighing.

Mervyn's ears had just caught the first mutter of the approaching storm. "Whew! it is nearer than I supposed," he said. "We can't possibly get home before it begins, and I don't like to take you through those lanes full of trees while it is going on."

"There it is! O Mervyn!"

Ida started from head to foot, as a keen blaze suddenly shone in their eyes, and a heavy crash followed.

"Frightened?"

"No, I don't think so — not exactly — but I'd rather be at home. I always feel so strange in a storm."

"Some people do. Come, we had better get under shelter of that rock a little way on. Take a run. I must not let you linger under those trees between."

They gained the shelter, which was formed by a sort of overhanging natural wall, with grass above at no great height, and large stones scattered below. Mervyn took his seat upon one, with Ida, as before, by his side, and hardly were they settled before the forked lightning again streamed forth, and the thunder rolled and echoed around.

"It is very near," said Ida, in a subdued tone.

"Yes—rather. That last was a fine flash."

"I don't like it."

"Don't you? Well, then, think of something else."

"How can—— Oh, there it is again!"

"It won't last long. We shall have rain."

"Addie would not be afraid," murmured Ida. "And Mr. Marchmont says he hears God's voice in a storm, and I think he loves it."

"He is a good old man," said Mervyn. "I could wish I were more like him."

Ida sprang to her feet with a low cry. The flash and the crash were simultaneous, the lightning forked and dazzling, the thunder sharp and metallic in sound.

"Keep still. You are safest here. Something must have been struck."

"Mervyn, I 'm so afraid. I can't help it. People have been killed sometimes."

"A rare event. My dear, the storm will soon be over now."

She was ghastly pale, and clung to his arm convulsively, hiding her face.

"Oh, Mervyn!—Mervyn! I 'm sure I have been wrong. I wouldn't see it before."

"Wrong in what, dear?"

"In what—in what I have kept secret. I ought to have told. It can't be right to go on hiding a wrong for anybody's sake."

He spoke in a tone of authority, thinking that it might be kindest to take the decision as far as possible on himself. "No, it can't; so tell me what you mean."

Again the thunder pealed heavily overhead, and he felt how she thrilled all over, though she could not see the flash.

"Mervyn, my head feels so strange—I can't even think.

"You can think enough for this. Tell me the burden on your mind, my dear child. Tell me at once."

"I will—I will—when the storm is over."

"No, better no delay. You feel that it is right. Why put off?"

"Oh, I don't know. It may be my fancy—only because I am so frightened."

"Would you be frightened if your conscience were clear?"

Ida sobbed passionately.

"That is it. Oh, Mervyn, that is it. I can't be sure of forgiveness—of peace—if—if——"

"If you persist in veiling an evil of some sort, and thus taking a share in it."

"I am going to tell you. Oh! what's that?"

"Only rain. Go on."

"It's—it's—Oh, Mervyn!"



CHAPTER XVI.

BUT STOPS SHORT OF THAT POINT!

"WELL?" said Mervyn, as she made a long pause.

"You know, it is not my secret properly. No one told it to me."

"Then how do you know it?"

"Ah, that's the thing," murmured Ida. "Promise you won't despise me if I tell you all. I would not do such a thing now."

"I'm not likely to be disposed."

"Oh, you don't know. Promise me."

"If it is needed I promise most certainly. Come, Ida, you had better make haste and have it over."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't feel as if I could tell," sighed Ida. "I don't feel like it to-day indeed, Mervyn. I shall feel differently to-morrow."

"If a disagreeable thing has to be done, the sooner it is done the better," responded Mervyn. "How did you find out this wonderful secret?"

'If you laugh at me I shall not be able to tell anything at all," she said hastily.

"My dear child, I don't feel the least inclination to laugh," said Mervyn, who was in truth more disposed to be out of patience with her vacillation. "Come, how was it?"

"It was before mother died," said Ida, in a low voice, "and when she was too ill to be troubled about anything, so I could not tell her. I was glad I could not."

"Well——"

"There was a letter came to grandfather one morning, and I remember noticing that his hands shook a good deal as he was reading. He put it in his pocket and said nothing, but I think he must have pulled it out with his pocket-handkerchief. For when he had gone out of the room, and I was standing by the table, I dropped my own letter that had come by the same post, which I was reading, and it fluttered away under the table. And I stooped down and picked up one which I thought at first was the same—but—it wasn't."

"And of course you saw at once."

Ida was silent for a few seconds.

"Yes," she said. "Of course I did really. I used to tell myself that I did not, but that was self-deceiving. At all events, I looked at the sheet, and—and—somehow, Mervyn, when I had begun to read I couldn't make up my mind to stop till I reached the end."

Mervyn checked the words which rose to his lips.

"I know you despise me," said Ida sorrowfully.

"I should despise you if you could do it now. You were almost a child then, and perhaps didn't realize the dishonourableness of such an action."

"No, but I knew it was bad. I would have cut off my hand afterwards not to have done it. But it was done, and I never could unlearn what I had learnt in that letter."

"No," he said thoughtfully.

"Shall I tell you my secret now, Mervyn?"

"Stop a moment. I must think. I did not expect anything of this sort."

A long pause followed. They were pretty well sheltered from the rain where they sat, but it fell in heavy sheets around, and the thunder rumbled away in the distance, with occasional flashes of light. Mervyn gazed steadily into the distance, and Ida watched his face with deep anxiety.

"I'm in a state of perplexity, Ida," he said at length. "It is a difficult matter to decide."

"What? whether I ought to tell you or not?"

"Just so. You have placed yourself in a most awkward position. Having discovered another person's secret in such a manner, you are bound in honour not to disclose it."

"That's just what I have felt all this time," said Ida, sighing. "How I have hated myself for that moment of horrid curiosity! I am sure I have been

well punished for it. And now you think I still ought not to tell?"

"I can't fancy doing so myself in your position."

"But you don't know; you can't see the other side of the question," she said, in a sorrowful tone. "I'm allowing wrong-doing to be carried on, and an innocent person to be kept out of his rights, when it might be stopped. The thing ought to be known and it seems as if I had no right to make it known. It ought to be; but oh, Mervyn, don't think I want to tell. I can't bear the idea. It would bring so much trouble—trouble on you and me, and dreadful trouble on grandfather. Oh, what shall I do?"

"But not trouble on the person wronged?"

"No, only on ourselves; and most of all on grandfather."

"We must not think of ourselves," he said, with a stern set of his lips. "The right must be done, and the wrong, whatever it is, repaired."

"Yes, but I can't help minding. I do mind, and I think it is that which has kept me from telling, quite as much as the fear of being dishonourable. I'm afraid it has; but you won't dislike me for saying so? It was both together. Do you think I ought to tell?"

"The character of the secret may make a difference; does make some, no doubt. But still——"

Mervyn's bent brows showed entire absorption in the one thought, while Ida was pale and shivering with nervous excitement. The heavy rain gave signs

of ceasing, but a steamy damp came from the trees and grass around.

"What did you do with the letter after you had read it, Ida?"

"I—I—only let it drop down again where it was," she said brokenly. "I heard grandfather's step, and I was so frightened that I ran out of the room by another door. And when I came back he had taken away the letter."

"I tell you what," Mervyn broke out abruptly, "there's one way, and one only, of making things straight."

Ida looked frightened at his manner. "What is it?" she said.

"I see no other plan. You are bound in honour not to reveal a secret so learnt, and yet you are bound in principle not to sanction wrong-doing by concealment. But—you will not like my plan."

"I'll do what you wish," she said wonderingly. "What is it?"

"Just that you should confess to our grandfather your knowledge of his secret, and the way in which you became acquainted with it; and that——"

"Mervyn! I *couldn't!*"

Ida's cheeks became ghastly white, with a blue tinge round the lips. Mervyn supported her with his arm most tenderly, but his face did not relax, though the beseeching terror of her dark eyes almost unnerved him.

"You are faint."

"Yes. I don't know—I do feel so ill."

She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, breathing quickly, but he presently heard her whisper—

"I couldn't do that."

"I see no other way!'

"Oh, do let me tell you all now!" she implored.

"Nay, Ida, how can *I* sanction what I cannot but feel would not be honourable? If you tell me, it is at your own choice. The thing must become known, but the question is how? I have told you the right plan."

"Oh no. Oh, you don't know. He would almost kill me."

"I will take care about that. I shall be in the room, and insist upon knowing particulars from you or him."

Ida grew sick again at the bare thought of such a scene.

"You will take cold here," said Mervyn. "Can you walk home, do you think?"

"I don't know. Yes, I would rather be walking. Must I tell him to-night?"

"No, dear," said Mervyn gravely, touched by her submissive spirit. "To-morrow will do, if you prefer it. You will like to think first what to say."

"Only waiting makes more of a coward of me," she said, with a shiver.

"Well, then, we will see how you are when we get home."

"And you will help me in telling?" said Ida. "I could not get it out unless you did."

"You may depend upon me. It will not be so bad as you think."

"Oh, I don't know. You have not seen grandfather in a downright rage for so long. And you don't mind so much. He frightens me dreadfully."

"He will frighten you less if I am standing close beside you all the while. And, Ida, I think Addie Marchmont would tell you to look for another sort of strength."

"Yes," said Ida wistfully. "I must pray, must I not? And then, after this, perhaps I shall feel happier. I ought to confess to grandfather what I did, even independently of the secret being known, ought I not?"

"Yes, I think so," he said, touched again. "Come, my dear child, we must not delay any longer."

But it was a silent homeward walk. Ida was bracing up her timid nature for the confession she so dreaded, while Mervyn was considering how his own impetuosity would need to be controlled, if he would act his part in the affair with wisdom and success.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. TOWERS GETS A GLIMPSE BELOW THE SURFACE.

"GOOD afternoon, Mrs. Towers," said Mervyn, as he came unexpectedly upon that worthy woman in an outlying road, some twenty-four hours later.

"Good-day, sir," responded Mrs. Towers, with an old-fashioned curtsey.

"How is Cherry? Quite well, and you too?"

"Cherry's quite well, sir. I'm a deal troubled with the rheumatics in my back."

"Sorry to hear it. Have you been to the doctor?"

Mrs. Towers was delighted to enter into a disquisition on her state of health, the physic she had vainly taken, and the false pretensions of doctors who "pretended to make folks well and didn't do nothing for them." Mervyn listened patiently, though it must be confessed that his eyes wandered.

"And how's the young lady, sir?" asked Mrs. Towers, having sufficiently discussed her own case.

"Why, not very well. We were caught in the thunderstorm yesterday, and she had to go to bed the moment we reached home. I have not seen her since, but the housekeeper assures me she will be downstairs to tea."

"Caught in the storm! Deary me, that's bad," said Mrs. Towers, with commiseration.

"Very bad," responded Mervyn. "I say, Mrs. Towers, I want to ask a small favour of you."

"To be sure. I'd do anything in life," protested Mrs. Towers. "Maybe it's the work as Cherry is doing for Miss Stanhope. I'll tell her she's to make haste and not to dawdle. Young girls do need brushing up once in a while, sir."

"I hope you use a soft brush for the purpose."

"Sir!" said Mrs Towers.

"Don't brush up my friend Cherry on any account, I have no doubt the work is all right. I only wanted to ask your leave to make use of a certain piece of information which you lodged with Collins."

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Towers, completely in a mist.

"Your daughter was present in the Towers, I believe, when a certain Mr. Woollatt—Collins' step-father, in fact—paid a visit there."

"To be sure and so she was," said Mrs. Towers.

"Collins thought there could be no objection to his letting me know the particulars of what passed, and I want your permission to use them further."

"Deary me, sir, I don't know who has a right if you haven't, and the squire your own grandfather!"

said Mrs. Towers. "I'd be most happy, and Cherry too, as you should say and do what you like."

"You are quite sure about Cherry?"

"Deary me, yes, sir. I ain't going to ask her though," thought Mrs. Towers.

"Thank you. Were you very much pleased to see Jem Collins walk in the other day?"

Mrs. Towers bridled a little. "Well, sir, I'm not one of those folks as can put up easy with being forsaken of old friends."

"Forsaken!" repeated Mervyn.

"*I'm* not surprised—not one bit," said Mrs. Towers. "It isn't to be expected as a young man who has been all over the world, from one end of Australia to the other end of America, shouldn't be puffed up with all he's seen—though I don't like puffing up all the same, nor don't admire it. And we're poor folks, and can't talk grand, and it isn't surprising if he looks down upon us. No, sir, I'm used to a humble sphere, and so's Cherry, and I hope we can take it as we should and not be angered. But I do say Jem Collins isn't the same lad that he was, and if he was never to come near me again I wouldn't trouble my head about him. Jem oughtn't to be lifted up, but he is, and I hope we can go our own way all the same."

"My good friend, you are certainly labouring under a mistake," said Mervyn.

"A mistake! Yes, sir, I haven't got one doubt of it," said Mrs. Towers, waxing gradually hotter.

"It's all a mistake from first to last. It's a mistake to think Jem ever cared for us at all. It's a mistake that he ever came near us, I shouldn't wonder! Maybe it's a mistake as he keeps away! No, sir, *I* understand. But Jem needn't have been afraid. We ain't the sort of folks that pushes ourselves in other folks' way. We've learnt to keep ourselves to ourselves."

Mervyn placed himself with his back against the wall and waited patiently, since the widow's speech threatened to be a long one. He felt mystified, but hoped light might presently dawn upon the matter in hand.

"Yes, and we're independent of him," pursued Mrs. Towers, after a few repetitions of the above sentiments. "We're independent of him now. I'm but a lone widow, and time was when I thought Jem would be the lad to watch over my declining years and close my eyes. He was that devoted to my Cherry in years gone by, sir, as I really thought something would come of it. I really did, and I ain't often mistaken, being of a wise-like nature, as my mother was before me. But there's Mr. Hicks now, and we're independent of Jem."

"Jem is much obliged to you," said Mervyn, losing patience. "Have the goodness to tell me, Mrs Towers, is that affair settled?"

"Eh?" said Mrs. Towers inquiringly.

"Hicks, the schoolmaster. Is he going to marry Cherry?"

"It won't be his fault if he don't. Nor it won't be mine."

"Then you are only uncertain about Cherry herself?"

"Cherry is a good little girl, sir, and she'll do what I tells her. She isn't one of the perverse sort, as goes contrary to their parents' wills and suffers for it.'.

Mrs. Towers really did not mean this for a reflection upon Mervyn, but he frowned involuntarily.

"You will surely allow her a free choice in the matter? But it seems to me, Mrs. Towers, that you have forsaken Jem, instead of Jem forsaking you."

This set Mrs. Towers off again. She descanted warmly upon the length of time that Jem had allowed to elapse since his only real visit—upon his changed manner when he came to bring the news of Mr. Hicks' accident, and upon Cherry's distress.

It suited Mrs. Towers at this moment, by way of impressing Mervyn with the enormity of Jem's conduct, to represent Cherry's tears as caused mainly by pain at the alteration in her old playfellow.

Mervyn whistled slightly, almost noiselessly.

"Then if Cherry marries Mr. Hicks it will be rather in obedience to your will than her own," was the plainly uttered conclusion to which he came "Don't be afraid, Mrs. Towers. I will take care to

make no mischief with what you have said. But answer me one question. Suppose Jem Collins *were* to come forward and ask your leave to seek Cherry for his wife, would you consent?"

"Deary me, sir! Why, there's Mr. Hicks!" exclaimed the widow, in a fluster.

"That's just it. Mr. Hicks stands in the way. Well, I mustn't say much more; only you ought to know that the reason Jem has kept out of your way is *not* that he is proud of his travels, but simply because—in fact, because of Mr. Hicks. You understand? And if Cherry sends Mr. Hicks to the rightabout, you are safe to see plenty of Jem. Good-bye."

Mervyn nodded and passed on, and the widow stood in a maze.

"Well, well! Deary me, to think I could have made such mistakes! And Jem hasn't changed, after all. I might have known it too, with that nice open face of his. Shouldn't I like him for Cherry! But then there's Mr. Hicks. Maybe I'd best not tell Cherry a word of this till she's give him her answer. I don't see as it's much good to unsettle her. And Mr. Hicks has got a nice little cottage, and Jem has got none. I don't know as I wouldn't be most comfortable in that cottage. Jem mightn't offer me a home, as Mr. Hicks has done. No, I won't say one word to Cherry."

But, happily for Cherry, Mrs. Towers' command over a secret was small. She went about for an hour

after her return, much in the condition of a boiler growing each moment more full of steam. There comes a point at length when the boiler can contain no more.

"Cherry, who d'ye think I saw to-day?"

"I don't know, mother. Who?"

And then out it all came, without the faintest attempt at a reservation.



CHAPTER XVIII.

SOMETHING OF A STORM INDOORS FOLLOWS THAT WITHOUT.

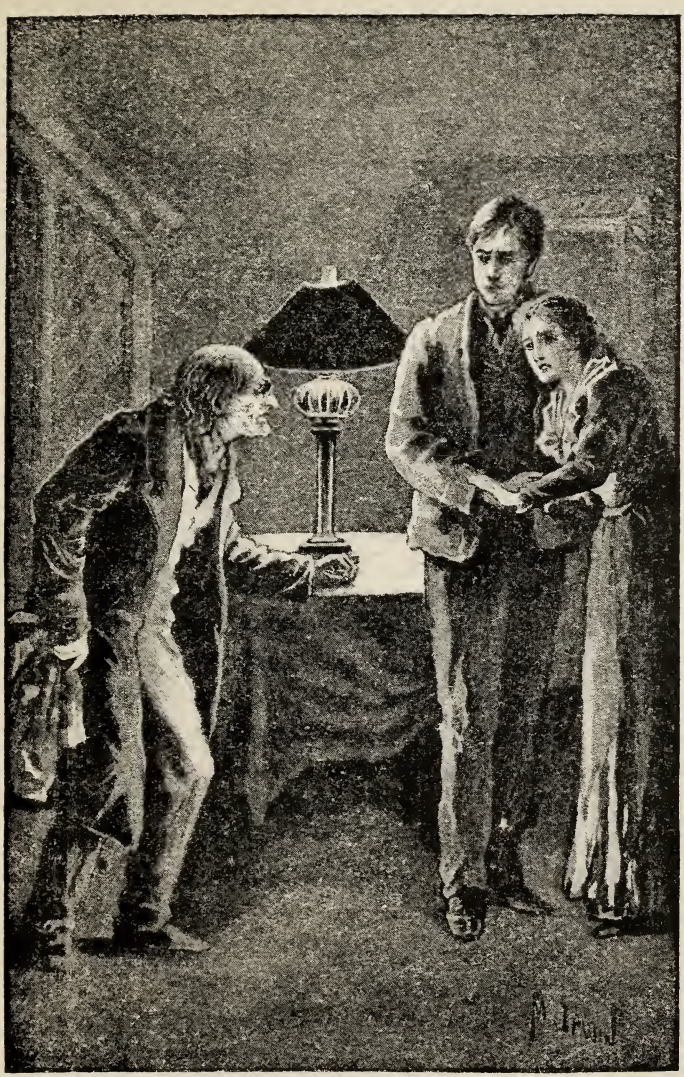
TEA was over in the parlour at the Towers, and a single candle glimmered upon the sombre table-cloth. Mr. Stanhope was nodding over a book in one easy chair, giving vent to an occasional snore, and start of pretended wakefulness, and Ida leant back in the other, looking nervous and shaken. Mervyn sat close to the light, with his eyes bent persistently on a small volume. He had not, however, turned over one leaf since first opening it.

Suddenly he tossed it aside, and looked full at Ida. A red spot came into each of her cheeks, and the rest of her face grew ashen, but she gave no response.

He rose and came to her side. "Ida, now is the time! Will you?"

Her lips formed a noiseless—"Yes."

"What now?" sharply asked Mr. Stanhope, vexed at being roused from his semi-slumber.



"My letter! Mine! You dared to read *my* letter?"—*p.* 144.

"Ida has something of importance to say to you."

"Go on and be quick, then," said the old gentleman.

But Ida's terror quite deprived her of the power of speech. She cast an imploring glance at her brother.

"If you have nothing to say, you had better have left me alone," said Mr. Stanhope.

"I will—will tell you—directly," panted Ida. "Directly——"

Another long break—or it seemed long to her listeners. Mervyn brought her a glass of water, for he really was afraid she would faint. She drank some, and clung to his hand convulsively with one of her own.

"Now, if you please!" said Mr. Stanhope curtly. "If you have anything to say, say it. If not, leave it."

"Ida has something to say, but she does not find it easy," interposed Mervyn. "Have a little patience with her."

"Speak at once, Ida," was the only response to this appeal; and the rap of the old gentleman's fist upon the table was not calculated to still Ida's nerves. She felt, however, that delay could only make matters worse, and forced herself to begin.

"It was—it was—was—some time ago. I would not do it now. It was wrong of me—but——"

"I am ready to take that for granted. Go on, and don't waste my whole day."

"There was a letter," faltered Ida.

"Well?"

"And—and—and—I read it."

"What else should you do?"

"But—but——"

"WILL you go on and say your say?" shouted the irate old man.

"You are making matters worse," said Mervyn's voice, very low. "Speak out the truth at once."

"Grandfather——"

"WELL!" thundered Mr. Stanhope.

"Grandfather——"

Ida's wits or language seemed to have forsaken her. Her eyes gazed blankly at the wall, and she lifted her hand to her forehead, with a muttered—"What had I to say next?"

"Whose letter was it?" Mervyn whispered, acting prompter. Ida shuddered, and Mr. Stanhope unfortunately—or fortunately—heard the question. He wheeled round upon his heel, and faced her.

"Aye, whose letter?"

"Yours," was all that Ida could summon strength or courage to utter.

"My letter! Mine! You dared to read *my* letter! A letter of MINE! You little—you little——"

Beginning with a deep mutter, the voice rose into a husky shout of indignation. Words failed the speaker at the close, and he made a step towards the girl.

"I didn't—know—oh, will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you! You little smooth-faced, deceitful hypocrite! My letter!"

"This is unseemly," said Mervyn, with sternness. "Ida is making all the reparation she can. Let her explain, pray."

"Go on, then. Explain as much as you like," said Mr. Stanhope loudly.

"It was before mother's death," continued Ida. "You dropped it down on the floor, and I took it up; and for a moment I thought it was my own. But I ought not to have read it. I know how wrong it was. I would not do such a thing now."

"I shall take very good care not to allow you the opportunity," sneered Mr. Stanhope. "If ever you lay one finger upon a letter of mine again——"

"No fear of that," said Mervyn.

"And of course you have detailed the contents, whatever they were, to every individual of your acquaintance since? Trust a woman for that," said Mr. Stanhope contemptuously.

"You wrong Ida," said Mervyn. "She has detailed them to no one—not even to me. But from what she says I gather that they were of such a nature that they ought to be made known. It may be her positive duty to divulge them, even without your consent, if your consent is not to be obtained."

There was a manifest change in the old man's face. The exaggerated features were still distorted by anger, but something of uneasy suspicion seemed struggling to the surface.

"What—what—I don't understand. Duty! nonsense. Consent! I tell you what——"

"Ida, what was the character of the letter?" demanded Mervyn. "Why do you feel that it should not be concealed?"

Ida spoke more steadily now, feeling that the worst of her own task was over. "Because I learnt something in it which I did not know before," she said. "There is a wrong being done, and it ought to be set right."

"And you feel that you are a party to the wrong by hiding it?"

"Yes; and I can't be happy to go on so any longer."

"Will you tell your grandfather whom the letter was from?"

"From Randall Woollatt—Collins' stepfather."

Mervyn controlled his own involuntary start. But Mr. Stanhope, who during this brief dialogue had gazed doubtfully from one to the other, now broke out into a storm. What did they mean? What right had they to meddle in his private affairs? He would stand no more of it. 'Interference!"—"impertinence!"—"insolence!" were the least of the words he showered upon his offending grandson. He strode furiously up and down the room, dashing aside every unconscious obstacle, and lashing himself up to such a state that at length he literally foamed at the mouth with rage. Mervyn waited quietly, rather in advance of his sister. He had never felt less inclined to lose his own temper. There was something in the impotence of this miserable exhibition which kept him

calm by mere force of contrast. As a child he had been excited by it; as a man he looked on with contemptuous pity at the example of slavery to passion.

The storm began at length in a measure to lull Mr. Stanhope presently stood still before Ida, his hands shaking, his face blanched, his eyes bloodshot.

"Mervyn, you may let me settle this affair with Ida. Leave the room."

"I beg your pardon, but I must decline," said Mervyn.

"Why?—why?—what have you to do with it?"

"If wrong has been done, I may have a voice in seeing it righted."

"Will you go?"

"No!" was the resolute answer.

"Ida, you are not to tell, till I have spoken with you alone."

"I do not consent to that," interposed Mervyn. "The truth must be known. I will be the judge myself as to whether it shall go further."

"You will! Ha, ha! You take a pretty deal upon you! Well—you shall have a voice in the matter. I know what the voice will be too. You want to hear the secret—and you shall! Somebody wronged! Nonsense! It's I that would be wronged! What right had he? None at all. I say he had none. He was too old to change his mind—too old. Do you understand—he was older than I? So you need not say anything. Now you understand.

Hush it up, mind; nobody need know. I've silenced that man—for a consideration, of course—for a consideration. But it was worth while. That's why we have to take care. The money goes so fast. But nobody knows, and we're all safe—all right—mind you—not a word to be said."

In a strangely thick and husky voice, with much hesitation, these confused sentences were poured forth, while a rush of blood suffused the old man's face, and the veins stood out like knotted cords upon his brow. Mervyn listened painfully, but could arrive at no definite conclusion as to his meaning.

"What is it all about?" he inquired of Ida. "You can explain."

"Explain! why, anybody can explain," shouted Mr. Stanhope, with an utterance so indistinct that they could scarcely make out his words. "I—I—I—wouldn't tell, Mervyn—there's no need—I wouldn't. I've saved so carefully—I won't give it all up now. I tell you I won't. Beggars, do you say? No, we're not, but we should be. Get along, and don't stand staring there. Beggars! I—I say—don't you—go—and—tell——"

"He is ill," gasped Ida.

Mervyn sprang forward, but not in time. With one heavy reel the old man sank prone upon the floor, knocking aside a chair in his fall.

CHAPTER XIX.

MERVYN MAKES AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE.

SUPPER was just finished at the Vicarage—a very simple meal. Mr. Marchmont looked towards the drawing-room door, somewhat longingly.

"It doesn't rain now, Addie."

"No, father, but it is very damp to-night, and you have been twice wet through this week. And you don't particularly want to be as hoarse as a raven on Sunday."

"Just one little turn in the churchyard could not hurt anyone," pleaded Mr. Marchmont.

"Oh, now, you are going to be wise and prudent to-day, and stay indoors like a dear, good father. Did you go to see Mr. Hicks this afternoon?"

"Yes, and he is better—decidedly better. But I am afraid he will be rather weak in the head for a good while to come. The doctor doesn't think he will be fit for school-work, so we shall have to look out for

somebody else. It is disappointing for us, and much worse for him, poor fellow."

"That explains——" said Addie involuntarily.

"Explains?" said Mr. Marchmont inquiringly.

"Does he know—does anybody know—that he will have to give up the work?"

"Why, yes, somebody has let it slip—rather prematurely, I think, as he *may* recover faster than we expect. Poor Hicks spoke of it, with tears in his eyes. But he didn't murmur at all. He seemed quite resigned, and I was glad of that."

"And his mother knows, I suppose," said Addie, after a pause. "She will be sure to have told others. That explains! I saw old Mrs. Towers to-day, and she puzzled me."

"How?"

"Why, last time she spoke to me she was quite eager about Mr. Hicks and Cherry, and talked of it as almost a settled thing. And now she has veered completely round; says Cherry never cared for him, and anybody could have seen it, and declares the engagement will never come to pass at all."

"I'm afraid it will be a great trouble to poor Hicks, then," said Mr. Marchmont. "He seems very much set upon that nice little Cherry Towers."

"I can't like Mrs. Towers for wishing Cherry to forsake him directly he is in trouble."

"Perhaps she doesn't. And others have thought it would come to nothing, so we won't call it 'forsaking.' We mustn't judge her."

"She is disappointing, though," said Addie. "I never know what I am *at* with Mrs. Towers. She says one thing one moment, and the next moment twists round and says just the opposite."

"Well, well, Cherry is a good steady girl, so we will hope Mrs. Towers' training hasn't been bad," said Mr. Marchmont. "Has Mervyn been here to-day, my dear?"

"No, father." A little pink glow came to Addie's cheeks, and she began to work industriously.

"I met him this morning, and he said he meant to look in. And I think he looked in yesterday also. He is an idle man, with a good deal of time on his hands. I didn't quite know how to answer him. I don't like to check the lad—and yet, we can't have him always hanging about here."

"I don't think he is idle," said Addie.

"Well, perhaps that is too strong. He certainly finds occupation for himself. But he is a man of leisure."

"And he is our cousin; so he feels—rather—at home here, perhaps," said Addie.

"I 'm afraid he does. My dear, the relationship is so distant that it ought not to count for anything."

Addie worked busily, but did not speak.

"You see, I am a great deal away from home," said Mr. Marchmont gently, with a rather anxious look on his placid face. "And I cannot help being so. And my Addie is young, and has no mother to watch and warn her. I 'm afraid of blundering now

by speaking, but I think I might blunder worse by keeping silence."

"If you think Mervyn too often here, you could tell him so," murmured Addie, the pink in her cheeks deepening.

"That's the thing. I can't bear to cast off any influence I may have over the lad. And yet I must think of my Addie. He is a nice, warm-hearted fellow, and there is a great charm about him. His very impulsiveness, added to his being such a thorough gentleman, makes him more attractive."

"I think everybody likes him," said Addie.

"Yes; and he has the power of winning heart-whole and lasting devotion from those about him. It is just that which makes me fear. Dear child, he is very attractive and pleasant, and kind. But there is a great want in Mervyn Stanhope. He does not serve your Master and mine."

Addie went on working faster and faster, tangling her cotton, and breaking fast first one needle and then a second. Tears forced their way into her eyes, and blinded her so that she could not see how to thread a third.

'I don't think we know. We can't judge," she said at length.

"I would not judge any man willingly; but there are times when we must make up our minds one way or the other. And though I believe Mervyn to be well-disposed, he is only a man of the world. He does not profess to be anything else. If he did, I would

hope even against hope that all was right. But if you asked him he would answer frankly that it was even as I say. I do not judge a man when I take him for what he professes to be."

Addie knew that he spoke the truth, and she knew also why the warning had been uttered. Nothing more was said, and presently she slipped away, so noiselessly that her father did not even perceive that she had vanished.

The front-door bell pealed, and Mr. Marchmont looked up.

"Somebody ill, I am afraid. I wonder who it can be at this time of night? Why, Addie has gone! Poor child! But I could not help speaking. It has been a great trouble to me. The change in his manner has, I am afraid, been unmistakable of late. Yet I don't know whether he himself is aware of it. Why! that is surely his step in the hall. Impossible! But it is."

Mr. Marchmont rose as the door was thrown open. Mervyn entered impetuously, his boots muddy, his usually wavy hair plastered close by the rain. He was paler than Mr. Marchmont had ever seen him, and his lips had taken a stern yet nervous set.

"Anything wrong? What is it? Can I help?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"My grandfather is ill."

"Since when? Not very ill, I trust."

"Dangerously. Only this evening. A stroke, the doctor says."

"A stroke! Rutherford Stanhope dangerously ill!" Mr. Marchmont repeated the words solemnly, and stood lost in thought. "This is terribly sudden —terribly sad."

He woke up to the consciousness that Mervyn was leaning against the chiffonnier, with a hand over his eyes.

"But you are tired out, my dear boy. I am forgetting you. Sit down here, and rest, and tell me all about it. Will you have a little supper?"

"Thanks, no. I can't eat."

"Your grandfather has not asked for me, I suppose?"

"No; he is unconscious, and likely to remain so."

Mr. Marchmont moved his head sorrowfully in assent.

"You don't tell me how the attack came on."

"Something which happened this evening," said Mervyn. "We had a very agitating scene. My grandfather was fearfully excited, and at last fell down senseless. Ida was in violent hysterics afterwards. I could not leave them till the doctor had been."

"Quite right to come to me," said Mr. Marchmont. "Quite right, my dear boy. But you don't tell me what caused the scene."

"For *once*, thank God, not wrong on my part," said Mervyn. "I cannot feel that I have to blame myself in the matter."

"Ah, I am glad indeed of that. I was a little afraid."

"As you have reason to be. No, the truth is there were certain disclosures made. That is what has brought me to you."

"Disclosures," repeated Mr. Marchmont absently, for his thoughts were with the unhappy sufferer at the Towers.

"Yes. There has been grievous wrong done," said Mervyn. "The gist of it may be told in few words. Mr. Marchmont—I beg your pardon, but are you listening?"

He touched the old clergyman's arm gently, and Mr. Marchmont sighed.

"Poor fellow! Poor Stanhope! It is terrible to think of. I can hardly believe it. But he may recover yet."

"I have something of importance to say to you. I must ask your attention."

Mr. Marchmont gazed with a pair of dreamy eyes.

"There has been a great wrong done," said Mervyn emphatically. "All these years that my grandfather has lived at the Towers, he has lived there, first under a delusion, secondly under something far worse."

"Delusion—yes," sighed Mr. Marchmont. "It is utter delusion. There is no delusion so deep as that of seeking happiness in wealth. My dear fellow, don't you be so led astray."

"I am in no danger," said Mervyn.

"I think you are—may be in the future, that is to say."

"No, I am a penniless man. The temptations of wealth at least will not be mine."

Mr. Marchmont took in the sense of his words at last, but only to look at him with kind solicitude.

"Mervyn, I don't think you are very well. I don't think you quite know what you are saying. Will you lie on the sofa for a little while, and get some sleep, while I go alone to the Towers? You are quite pale and unlike yourself."

"I know what I am saying," Mervyn responded. "I told you just now that a great wrong had been done to somebody."

"Yes, yes, I remember," said Mr. Marchmont, still watching his companion closely, and becoming absorbed in a new idea. "You have not been going about bareheaded in the sun, have you?" The old gentleman recalled to mind a slight case of sunstroke which had taken place the week before in Ickledale.

"Have you no curiosity to know who is the individual wronged."

"Yes, yes, just so," said Mr. Marchmont soothingly. "It is all right, my dear boy, and now you are going to lie down, and try to sleep off this headache."

Mervyn almost groaned. "I assure you, I 'm not insane, but really you will drive me so! Do, please, listen for one moment."

"Yes, to be sure I will; don't be excited," rejoined

Mr. Marchmont, concealing his uneasiness. "What was it? Oh yes, somebody injured, you said."

"Wronged or injured. Who do you think?"

"Ah! who?" said Mr. Marchmont mildly.

"YOU, Mr. Marchmont!"

Mr. Marchmont gave another little gentle smile, and Mervyn became distressfully conscious that he was only confirming the old clergyman's idea as to his imbecile state of mind.

"I am talking sober earnest," he said with emphasis. "The fact is, *you* are the rightful owner of the Towers, and Addie is heiress to all its wealth. My grandfather has no right there whatever, and Ida and I are homeless wanderers. I 'm obliged to put it strongly, or you won't believe me. Don't think I am complaining. I am simply telling you actual facts."

CHAPTER XX.

MR. MARCHMONT DOESN'T WANT TO BE RICH.

"POOR fellow! he is very far gone," thought Mr. Marchmont. "This *is* sad. It must be a sharp touch of sunstroke; but what can I do with him? Perhaps walking home in the cool air may do him good. I wonder if there is any truth after all in Stanhope's illness? It seems to me rather like delusion from first to last. But anyhow I must humour him. Eh! yes, Mervyn," as he was startled back to the consciousness that Mervyn was talking very fast, and he was not listening.

"Yes, to be sure—yes," he said vaguely. "It is getting late. Don't you think we had better go to the Towers soon?"

"Not you to-night on any account. My grandfather would not know you, and it would be needless fatigue. I only came to relieve my mind of this discovery."

"I see! yes, thank you," said Mr. Marchmont compassionately. "But I could not be content not to walk home with you."

"To take care of me! I declare, this is too ridiculous," exclaimed Mervyn, bursting into a fit of laughter. "How in the world am I to convince you? I shall never doubt again the tales of sane folks imprisoned in madhouses. Look me in the face, and tell me—do I show signs of insanity?"

"My dear Mervyn, you are only a little over-excited."

"As I have good reason to be. Feel here, if you like; mine is no fever-pulse. Your head would ache a great deal more than mine does, if you had been through the scenes that I have been through to-day. But my mind is as collected as possible. Ah, here comes Addie. She will understand. Addie, your father takes me for a semi-lunatic. Do I look like one?"

"Mervyn says his grandfather has been taken ill, and I am going home with him, Addie."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"And I was telling Mr. Marchmont certain facts which have only come to my knowledge to-day, but he will not believe me. Did it ever strike you that Ida had some trouble on her mind?"

"I have never felt the least doubt about it for a good while past."

"Well, the cause has come out to-day."

He began by unfolding past events: Ida's occa-

sional appeals and questions to himself; the conversation during the thunderstorm, though he touched very slightly upon Ida's reading of the letter; the scene at the Towers that day, and the sudden conclusion.

"Did Ida explain more afterwards?" asked the much-interested Addie, while Mr. Marchmont's attention was at last fully enchained.

"As soon as she was well enough to talk, she told me all she knew. What she says was certainly confirmed by my grandfather's words before he was taken ill."

"Yes!" said Mr. Marchmont.

"The letter was from Randall Woollatt—Collins' stepfather. What connection he has with the matter I cannot possibly tell. He appeared, Ida says, to be letting my grandfather know for the first time that he was acquainted with certain facts, consequently to be running them over in a sort of brief sketch, not mentioning precisely how they had come to his knowledge, but taking it for granted that my grandfather would understand this, and evidently triumphing in his power over him."

"What facts?" asked Addie.

"That the Towers ought never to have come to my grandfather at all, but that the estate belongs absolutely to your father, Addie—to you, Mr. Marchmont."

"Nay, Mervyn, you are talking wildly now," said the clergyman, looking grieved.

"I am talking sober sense. Are you not pleased? Will you not believe in the good news?"

Adela shook her head, and Mr. Marchmont mildly set himself to work to convince Mervyn of the impossibility that any such notion could contain a grain of truth.

"You see, Mervyn—Addie—the thing simply cannot be, and I want you to understand it once for all. When my father and Rutherford Stanhope were boys—my father, of course, many years the oldest—then my dear grandfather and Rutherford's mother, wife of Mr. Stanhope, were the only remaining members of the family, except their old great-grandfather, who was still lingering on at the Towers. He was a strange old gentleman, I believe—not unlike Rutherford Stanhope—and he lived to a great age, with his mind clear as daylight to the last."

"Just so," put in Mervyn eagerly.

"Yes, there is no doubt about that," said Mr. Marchmont gently. "My grandfather and Rutherford's mother were, of course, first cousins, and having lost their parents, every one would naturally have expected the estate to descend to my grandfather. It did not, however. He often told me about this as a child. He deeply offended his great-grandfather, and the estate not being entailed, was willed away by the old gentleman to the younger branch—to Rutherford's mother, in fact—from whom after a short time it descended to himself. Now, you will understand how mistaken

you must be in your present idea. Nothing could undo that will."

"Except a later one."

"There was no later one."

"So it has been thought. But there *was* a later one—found when, I cannot tell you; and carefully destroyed—by whose hands I cannot tell you, but I conjecture by my grandfather's. I suppose no living man has been hitherto acquainted with the fact except Randall Woollatt, though how he learnt it I cannot tell you either."

"My dear boy, it seems to me one of the most improbable stories I ever heard," said Mr. Marchmont. "All conjecture and no proof. I should be exceedingly grieved, for your grandfather's own sake, to believe that he could do such a thing. But as for the rest, the less said about it the better. I am perfectly happy here. Riches would be simply a burden to me. So now you have relieved your mind, and we can let things go on as they were before," concluded the old clergyman, with his happy smile.

"On no account," said Mervyn. "I have no right to live on borrowed wealth, neither have you a right to cast aside what is justly yours."

"Well, well—we must think the matter over. I want to come and see poor Stanhope now. He would not admit me in health, but perhaps in sickness he may be willing."

"The injured and the injurer," muttered Mervyn.

"But don't you think Ida's imagination may have

run away with her?" asked Addie. "How could a will have been discovered so long afterwards?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"And how could Mr. Woollatt have had anything to do with it?"

"Facts are stubborn things."

"What facts?" asked Adela.

"If you saw but once my grandfather's feeling with respect to Woollatt, you would not doubt the nature of his share in the business."

"Besides, there is the letter which Ida read. If it really was one of such importance—one holding such a secret—was it likely, or possible even, that your grandfather would not guard it more carefully?"

"Not likely or even possible with some men, but both with him. You do not know how completely he loses his self-possession under agitation."

"Well, I only know I hope it isn't true," cried Addie, with burning cheeks. "Father doesn't believe it, and I don't either. I would not leave this dear vicarage for anything or anybody, and it would be—would be—miserable to see you and poor Ida turned out of your home." The usually placid Addie burst into a flood of tears, and ran out of the room.

"You see, my dear boy," said Mr. Marchmont gently, "neither Addie nor I want the Towers, even if there were any foundation for this wild idea."

"Truth is truth, and justice is justice," Mervyn answered sternly. "I will have no hand in ill-gotten wealth. I would sooner break stones upon the road."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN OLD MAN SHOWS THE STRENGTH OF HIS GOLDEN FETTERS.

WEEKS had passed away and still the old man lay on his sick-bed, treading with unconscious feet the awful borderland between this life and the next. The end might be very near, the doctor said, yet from day to day it was deferred.

How had Rutherford Stanhope made preparation for that approaching "end"? He had paid his very soul away for money. He had bartered eternal wealth for earthly gold. And as fast as the wretched dross became his own, he had stored it up for those who should come after him. What good, what peace, what happiness, had he gained from the possession? None whatever. He had not even allowed himself the poor and vain satisfaction of worldly plenty and worldly ease. A miserable life was being crowned by a miserable death-bed.

Those were solemn and heart-searching weeks to

Mervyn Stanhope. A great change had come across his prospects, and the manner in which that change had come could hardly fail to make a thoughtful mind stand still and ponder. Mr. Marchmont might refuse entire credence still to the tale of the second will, but Mervyn doubted it not at all. He pondered long and pondered deeply during that time of doubt and leisure, weighing oftentimes the worth of this hoarded wealth. A strange contrast stood day by day before his eyes, in the one aged man going down to the tomb in darkness, with the load of his sins and his ill-gotten gold upon him; and in the other old man—old, though some twenty years younger—with his enfolding atmosphere of heavenly peace, and his reluctance to touch the riches which were justly his own. The lesson to be read was a plain one, and Mervyn not only read it but learnt it by heart. The beginning of his grandfather's illness found him, as Mr. Marchmont had truly said, a well-disposed and thoughtful man, still "of the world," and nothing more. Before the close of that illness a change was creeping over him—a change which none can know or understand save those who have experienced it.

Mervyn said little about the matter. He was naturally reserved, especially when deeply stirred. But those around failed not to mark the fact that Mervyn Stanhope was not quite the same that he had been.

Least of all did Mervyn say anything to Addie Marchmont. He held himself studiously aloof from

her, and avoided all in his manner which could by any possibility be construed into a desire to seek her hand. Mr. Marchmont might fairly have deemed his former idea to have been a mistake, and Mervyn to be entirely indifferent to his daughter. But Mr. Marchmont, with all his dreaminess, had considerable insight into human nature, and had specially marked the delicate sense of honour which was one of Mervyn's leading characteristics. With this clue he was not long in reading the truth, but he kept his own counsel.

One foggy autumn day Mr. Marchmont entered the parlour at the Towers and found Mervyn standing, deep in thought, beside a window.

"Dull weather, isn't it? How do you do? How is your grandfather?"

"There is a slight change to-day. He moves a little, and mutters indistinctly, and we thought he recognised Ida. The doctor has been, and says it is just possible that there may be a slight rally."

"Ah!" breathed Mr. Marchmont—"one can understand in his case the cry—'A thousand pounds for one hour of life'—of sense!"

"I have been thinking," began Mervyn.

"Thinking?"

"Yes. How much longer are things to go on like this?"

"Like what?"

"In this uncertainty. I am wasting time, when I ought to be up and doing. I have serious thoughts

of returning to Australia—as soon as Collins can come with me. Meantime we should make preparations. My grandfather's illness may run on for months. I ought to be making my way in the world. Why should not you and Addie come and live here without any more delay?"

"My dear boy, you have to produce proofs. I am not at all convinced yet."

"If that last advertisement of mine fails to bring Mr. Woollatt to light, I don't know what can. No proofs are needed."

"In fact, if the will was destroyed, I don't know how they ever can be brought," murmured Mr. Marchmont. "So why should not things go on quietly as they are?"

Mervyn shook his head decisively.

"That will never do. If I choose to put the matter into the hands of lawyers, they will soon ferret out proofs," he said.

"Poor Rutherford—and Collins' mother too—think of the trouble in which it might involve so many. O no!" said Mr. Marchmont, with gentle energy.

"If you will not take your rights, I shall have to force them upon you. I am waiting only to see what turn the illness may take."

"Just so—better to wait," said Mr. Marchmont. "Things will be settled somehow, my dear boy. I don't think you will need to go to Australia, and you must not ask me to leave my home. I must live amongst my poor people. Why, I should be out of

their way altogether at the Towers. No, no, that would not do at all. If it really ever came to anything of that sort, then you and Ida would have to keep the house, and look after the estate for me."

Mr. Marchmont's pleased look became shadowed at Mervyn's gesture of refusal.

"Why not? It would be such a happy plan."

"Never mind why; I can't tell you just now," said Mervyn, somewhat huskily. "I am bent upon Australia, and you know I generally follow my own devices."

"Well, well, we shall see," repeated Mr. Marchmont. "How do you do, Ida? Shall I come up to your grandfather?"

"If you please," she answered; and in a few minutes they stood together beside the great four-post bedstead, with its dark hangings.

A slight restlessness and muttering came from within. Mr. Marchmont went nearer, and bent low over the pillows. He spoke and tried to win attention, but seemingly in vain. He repeated a few Bible words, in the hope that they at least might reach through the dulled hearing, but there was no response. He knelt with all who were present in prayer around the bed, but when they rose the mutterings went feebly on as before.

Nay, there was a slight change. The tones were clearer. What was he saying?

"Hush! listen!" whispered one or two expectant voices.

The old man's dim eyes wandered vaguely about, as he seemed striving to give utterance to his thoughts. Breathlessly those about him hung upon the mumbled sounds. Ha! they heard at last:

"Mo-mo-money!"

Was that all he had to say? Had the gold verily entwined itself in grasping bands around his aged heart?

"Listen again," said Mr. Marchmont sorrowfully. And it came again:

"Mo-money! Don't-spen-spen-spend-too-too-much." A feeble laugh broke into the words, and the muttering grew more hurried any indistinct.

But they spoke to him in vain. He had not heard or understood.

CHAPTER XXII.

JEM GETS NO NEARER HOME THAN THE GARDEN.

"HOW d'ye do, Jem? Quite well, eh? I shouldn't wonder if you was just coming to pay us a visit now," said Widow Towers, in an extremely cordial tone, happening to encounter Collins outside her garden-gate about a week later.

"Why, no; I don't know as I thought of coming in," said Jem, blushing. "I only just happened to walk round this way."

"Going back to the Towers?"

"Why, yes," said Jem.

"And been a walk first, maybe?"

"Why, no, I've been to call the doctor," said Jem.

"Deary me; nobody ill, I hope. But this ain't in your way back from the doctor's."

"The squire's took worse to-day," said Jem, glad to escape answering the latter remark. He really could not have explained why he had chosen to

travel so far out of his route, except that he had been troubled with a vague longing to look at the outside of the cottage where Cherry dwelt.

"Poor old gentleman! Ain't like to live long, I suppose. They do say, Jem, as there's something uncommon strange coming out about them Towers."

"People say lots of things they've no business to say," returned Jem. "I believe if there was a secret buried in the deepest hole that ever was dug, Ickledale folks would find it out."

"Then there is a secret!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers, with much delight.

"I said '*if* there was one," responded Jem, vexed at his unguarded slip.

"Well, folks do say it," repeated Mrs. Towers, careless or unconscious of the fact that she herself had set the report rolling, in consequence of the scene which Cherry had once witnessed at the Towers, combined with Mervyn's request to make use of the same, and with Woollatt's disappearance. Mrs. Towers had sufficient keenness to detect that "something was in the wind," and she did not make the least of that something in gossip with her friends.

"I must be going on," said Jem.

"It's a good while since you've been to see us, Jem," said Mrs. Towers.

Jem didn't know what to say to this. Last time he had encountered her, she had been decidedly

repellent in her manner, and the alteration was perplexing.

"And Cherry, as you used to make so much of—have you quite forgot her, Jem?"

"Forgot Cherry! No!" burst out Jem, with unwonted warmth.

"Well, she's indoors now," said Mrs. Towers, smiling broadly.

Jem thought of his resolution, and held back.

"Come and have a cup of tea, like old days."

"Fact is———" began Jem. "Fact is, Mrs. Towers——"

"Well?" said Mrs. Towers, smiling still.

"Fact is—Hicks and I can't both come," said Jem bluntly.

"Mr. Hicks came two days ago—first time he was up to it—and it'll be the last," said Mrs. Towers. "It's weeks since I told Mrs. Hicks it wouldn't be no manner of use his speaking to Cherry, for I'd found out she wasn't going to have him on no account. But she wasn't persuadable—or he wasn't—and he came all the same. Well, he did behave uncommon nice, I must say that for him," added the widow, somewhat relenting. "'He knew it made a difference,' he said, 'as he had to give up being schoolmaster here, and his head wasn't strong, and he couldn't offer Cherry a home so soon as he he'd wished; but he said he couldn't help hoping still, and he couldn't leave Ickledale without speaking first.' And I told him Cherry should speak herself,

and so she did. She told him it wasn't all that as made any real difference, and she was sorry for him, but she wouldn't have him. He did try his best to make her give him some hope, and Cherry cried at last, he seemed so down-hearted; but she didn't give way. No, he won't come back again."

A pause followed. Jem looked down, hardly able to believe that he had heard the truth. He knew nothing of Mervyn's intervention.

"Well!" said the widow, "will you come now?"

"Stop a moment," said Jem, in a husky tone, approaching somewhat nearer; "I've a word to say first. If I do come, perhaps you can guess what I'll come for."

Mrs. Towers nodded, and smiled to the utmost extent of which her muscles were capable.

"About Cherry," said Jem.

Mrs. Towers nodded on perseveringly.

"I always did want it," said Jem. "I've loved her all my life long, I do believe. And if I could get her for my own, I'd—I'd be the happiest man that ever lived."

"Well, I always had a notion as you'd be the lad to soothe my declining years," said the widow, growing sentimental.

"But there's one thing I must tell you. I've no settled home yet to offer to Cherry. My plans depend on Mr. Mervyn Stanhope's. Maybe he'll go back to Australia, and if he does I'm going with him."

"Australia!" Mrs. Towers almost shrieked the word. "Why, Jem! What do you mean? Australia! My Cherry ain't going to Australia, I can tell you that."

Jem felt as if a cloud were passing over the sun.

"I was afraid you'd feel so. But it isn't so far as it sounds."

"Not far! I'd as soon she should go to the moon —and a deal sooner too, for I can see the moon, and I can't see Australia," said Mrs. Towers excitedly, with a touch of feminine logic. "But what on earth do you mean, Jem? Mr. Stanhope'll never leave the Towers to go to that outlandish place."

"I can't tell you any more, except that he's talking of it, and I've promised to go too, if he goes."

"He wouldn't hold you to your promise."

"Maybe not, but I'll hold myself," said Jem.

"Wouldn't you change for Cherry's sake?" asked Mrs Towers.

"Forsake Mr. Mervyn in trouble, after all he's been to me! No, I couldn't do that," said Jem, though greatly agitated.

"Well, Cherry's not going to Australia to please nobody," said Mrs. Towers, with determination. "Never! So you needn't think it! Never! Why, it 'ud just kill me outright! Cherry shan't go."

Jem's hopes seemed slipping, slipping away. Following the impulse of the moment, he did the

very best thing which he could have done under the circumstances.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Towers," he said mournfully.

"Why, Jem, you 're coming indoors with me?"

"No, I 'm not."

"Not to see Cherry?"

"I daren't," said Jem. "If I 'm not to look for your consent, I 'd best keep out of her way. Good-bye, Mrs. Towers. I won't come this road again. Tell Cherry from me—no, don't tell her anything."

Jem's voice choked, and Mrs. Towers immediately began to cry.

"Now, don't, Jem! I didn't mean that, you know —of course, I didn't. It 'll have to be, and I won't say nothing more about Australia. Just come in and see her, and things 'll soon be straight. Come in—do!"

Jem went in obediently, nothing loth, but it was a considerable time before he came out again. Somehow he entirely forgot to wonder whether he might be wanted at the Towers. And when at length he started for home, it was with a swinging and buoyant step, and he whistled cheerily by the way—though Ickledale lay in darkness, and clouds veiled the stars overhead, and a shadowed household awaited his arrival.



CHAPTER XXIII.

BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL.

THE gate of the Towers garden was closed, and Jem fumbled with the latch for a second or two before he could move it in the darkness. There was a slight sound beside him in that brief interval, as of a step and a rustle, and then something touched his arm. Jem was by no means disposed to nervousness, but he turned pretty quickly to demand—

"What now! Who 's there?"

No answer came. Jem strove in vain to pierce the darkness.

"Is somebody here? What's the matter?"

Silence. Jem listened intently, with a heart that certainly beat somewhat more quickly than its wont. All at once a struggling sound, as of a woman's sob, struck upon his ear.

"I say, where are you, and what do you want?" asked Jem. "Is anybody hurt?"

There came a touch upon his arm again, and Jem caught a glimpse of a figure close behind him.

"Jem!"

"Who is it?" asked Jem, with a sudden change of voice; and in profound astonishment he exclaimed—"Mother!"

"O Jem, I knew it was you! Don't tell anybody!"

She clung to him and cried bitterly, and he returned her caresses.

"I thought I'd have found you here when I came back from foreign parts," he said at length.

"O Jem, don't! I was so lonely, I didn't know what to do. If you'd never gone——"

"Father forgave me. Haven't you too?"

"Forgive! It's you've got to forgive *me* now," she sobbed.

"Nonsense, mother. But what made you go off in such a fashion?"

"Woollatt made me. It was all his doing. Jem, don't tell that I'm here! Woollatt don't know I'm come. I couldn't stand no longer not getting a sight of you, and Woollatt had to go away a night, so I came. He hasn't been before, since I knew from the papers that you were back. I've been longing to see you so, I didn't know how to bear myself."

"Why should he mind our meeting?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know! He won't let me have anything to do with anybody in Ickledale. He's so dreadful determined. I'm frightened out of my life to cross him."

"You'll come indoors with me now?" said Jem.

"I couldn t. I wouldn't for anything! I'm only come for a word with you, and I saw you go out, but I was hiding in the bushes, and durstn't show myself by daylight lest it should come to Woollatt's ears; so I've been watching and watching here for you, and I thought you never would be back. I knew your step and whistle in a moment. But I'm going back by the night train. I wouldn't for anything that Woollatt should find me out when he gets back."

"Which train?" asked Jem, but she was too quick for him.

"Never you mind. I'm not going to tell you nothing of where I am, but only to talk a little, and then say good-bye. I've been thirsting so for a word with my boy, that it seemed as if I couldn't live without it."

Jem began to see that caution on his own part was necessary, or she might give him the slip. He was exceedingly anxious, for Mervyn's sake, that the uncertainties regarding the lost will should be cleared up. Happily Mervyn had acquainted him with such facts as had come to light, and he was now resolved that this opportunity for obtaining further information should not be lost.

"Well, maybe it's enough for you, mother, to hear me, but it seems as if it would be a deal more satisfactory if I could see you," he said. "Suppose you were to come the backstairs way into my room."

"No, I won't, Jem. I ain't going to risk anything."

"Then I'll just tell you what," said Jem. "You come along this path, and hide yourself in the summer-house. I'll show you where it is. And then I'll just go indoors for a minute, so as they won't be all wondering what's become of me, and when I come out again I can stay as long as I like, for old Lakins won't be looking out for my return."

"Nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Woollatt decisively. "I'm too knowing for that, Jem—without you'll promise not to tell a soul I'm here."

Jem had no intention of giving any such promise. He quietly led his mother to the summer-house, and sat down with her.

"Well, I can stay if you'd rather," he said, indifferently. "Maybe they won't think anything of it."

"Maybe they'll look for you here. I'd rather be somewhere else—among the bushes."

"Why, mother, how you're changed! You usen't to be afraid of daylight nor of honest folks."

"Changed! It's my life that is changed," said Mrs. Woollatt. "I'm miserable!"

She sobbed again, low but bitterly, and Jem tried to soothe her.

"It isn't that Woollatt's altogether bad to me," she said, at length, lifting her head. "He's my husband, and I've got to please him, you know, and to make the best of him. And he isn't always unkind, so long as I do what he likes."

"I hope he don't want you to do what's wrong," said Jem.

"What makes you think that?" she asked jealously.

"Well, mother, the manner of his going off from Ickledale wasn't such as to make him seem the most honest of men."

"He paid his bills before he went," said Mrs. Woollatt.

"Maybe he did," said Jem. "I don't say as I know much about him, mother, but I don't trust him. If all is fair and aboveboard in his life, what should he be always hiding his head for, like a rat in a hole?"

"He promised——" Mrs. Woollatt began, and stopped.

"Promised old Mr. Stanhope—ah, to be sure!" said Jem, with astonishing coolness and presence of mind, uttering his guess as if it were an established fact.

"Why, Jem, how on earth could you know that?" she asked, in the deepest amazement.

"Did you think it was a secret?" asked Jem calmly.

"Well, it wasn't *I* who let it out," said Mrs. Woollatt, in evident fear. "It wasn't I!"

"Seems queer that Mr. Stanhope should have asked such a thing," said Jem.

"Ah, you don't know why it was, Jem—nor I don't either," said Mrs. Woollatt.

"Mr. Woollatt's a man that knows how to keep his secrets, isn't he?" said Jem. "Have you got a long journey home?"

"Not over an hour by rail," she said, thrown off her guard by his composure. "We've come there lately."

"Out of trouble about Mr. Stanhope's illness, eh?" said Jem. "I shouldn't wonder if you started off the moment you heard of it, so as to be near at hand."

No answer came. Jem had an impression that his random guess came oddly near the truth.

"How do you pay for your journey, mother? Because I'd be glad to help you."

"No," she said. "I've saved up odd pence. Was it wrong, Jem? I did long to see you. But you don't seem half glad to see me."

And then they had a talk about old days, occasionally verging into the present. Jem kept his ears sharply open in search of stray information, but he attempted no more to leave her. Fear of Mr. Woollatt was evidently now the leading feature of her mind.

"It's getting late. I must be saying good-bye," she said at length.

"It won't take you over an hour to get to the station."

"Won't it though?" Whereupon Jem guessed immediately that the farther and not the nearer station of the only two which were within a moderate distance of Ickledale was her destination.

"And they'll wonder what's become of you, Jem."

"That they will," said Jem, mentally resolving that they would have to wonder a good deal longer.

"I 'm glad I 've seen you. And you won't forget me? Some day maybe I 'll see you again."

She kissed him with some sorrowful good-byes, and then hastened away into the darkness. Jem followed quietly in the distance, noting by the muffled sound of her feet which path she took. But for his backwoods and bush practice he would speedily have been at fault.

Once satisfied that his conjecture as to the station was correct, he took another road, making rapid advance with his long swinging stride. Before Mrs. Woollatt arrived Jem had secured a ticket for a station at some distance, there being, happily for his purpose, no branch lines near. He waited quietly in a dark part of the platform, till his mother appeared, and with a shrinking demeanour slipped into a third-class carriage. Jem made his way into another somewhat removed, whence he could watch from the window the moment when she should leave the train, and soon after they started.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MERVYN IS ROUSED TO ACTION.

ABOUT noon on the following day a ring at the front-door bell summoned Lakins. James Collins stood outside.

"Collins! Here you are, then! Where have you been?" asked the old man, in a subdued voice.

"Never mind. I'll explain my absence to Mr. Mervyn. Was he very much surprised?"

"I should think so. There'd have been more fuss than there has been about you—but——"

"I saw," said Jem. "The blinds are down."

Lakins shook his grey head sorrowfully.

"Was it yesterday?" asked Jem, shocked and sobered, for he had entered the garden in buoyant spirits.

"All over before midnight. He just went off without a word," said Lakins. "The doctor come, but couldn't do nothing. Mr. Mervyn didn't say

much, but he looked terrible cut up, and he was troubled at your being away too."

"They said the master seemed more sensible-like, yesterday afternoon, before I started," said Jem.

"Ay, Miss Marchmont thought he knowed her for a minute, but it didn't last. She cried so, poor Missy, one would never have thought he'd been so hard upon her in the past. But there! It's ill to speak evil of them that's gone. And Mr. Mervyn was comforting her, and got her off to bed at last; but he looked ready to drop himself, and I've scarce seen him this morning."

"I'll go to him at once," said Jem.

He hurried upstairs, tapped at Mervyn's door, and entered to find him lying on the sofa.

"Jem! At last?"

Mervyn started up, and then leant back, looking haggard and worn.

"What could have taken you away at such a time? We have all been afraid something was really wrong."

"I think you will say I was right when you have heard all, sir," responded Jem.

"Jem—you've heard, I suppose——"

"Yes, sir," Jem answered seriously.

"Not one moment of clear sense to the last; only confused mutterings about that wretched 'money—money!' I shall hate the chink of it from this day!"

"There's no need to feel so, sir," said Jem. "If

he had kept and used it as God's gift, the riches might have been a blessing and not a curse to him."

"Ha! there you have it! But if this tale be true, it was not God's gift, but only his own taking."

"True!" Jem answered thoughtfully

"We thought once that there was a recognition of Mr. Marchmont—perhaps even a passing sense of remorse. Miss Ida fancied she caught the word 'Forgive!' But I don't know. To me it was all black shadow. Jem, how I have prayed to be kept from such a 'last end' as that!"

He spoke in a tone of strong feeling, and both were silent for a minute.

"I don't like troubling you just now, sir, and I am afraid you are overdone as it is," said Jem presently. "But there's something I ought to tell."

"It will not keep till to-morrow, I suppose? You don't feel inclined for another bout of three months' nursing, do you, Jem?"

"Not particularly, sir," said Jem, veiling his anxiety.

"Because I'm beginning to feel rather as I did before that last illness of mine. Worry always does for me in the end, and there has been nothing but worry lately. I wish I had your composure. Well, you haven't told me what you were about yesterday."

Jem spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, though with a glow on his bronzed cheek: "I was at Mrs. Towers' first, sir, and Cherry's promised that if it comes to

pass that I go to Australia with you again, she'll come too."

"She has! Well done! You have made the best of your absence indeed. I congratulate you with all my heart."

"Thank you, sir. I found Mr. Hicks was sent away, so I didn't see any good in putting it off."

"But I say, Jem, how much have you seen of Cherry since your return?"

Jem laughed and coloured.

"Well, I knew her as a child, sir, and she's every inch the same now. I knew my own mind, and I didn't feel inclined to wait any longer."

"Then I only wish we could start for Australia next week. By-the-by, did you sleep at Mrs. Towers'?"

"No, I'm coming to that now," said Jem. "I've seen my mother, Mr. Mervyn."

Mervyn's languor vanished in a moment.

"Your mother! How? Where is she?"

Jem detailed the events of the preceding evening, and Mervyn listened with intense interest, occasionally asking a question by the way.

"Then you don't think she knows anything of Woollatt's connection with the will, whatever it may be?"

"If she does, she won't let it slip, sir. But it don't seem to me that Woollatt has told her much, though maybe he has let slip dark hints to frighten her."

"She doesn't really care for that man, does she?"

"I do really think she does," Jem answered. "She always was of a clinging sort of nature, and she doesn't make out that he's unkind, though he seems to have a firm hand over her. She speaks of him once in a while almost as if he was her jailer; and yet there's no mistake about her fondness for him."

"Woman-like!" muttered Mervyn to himself. "Like Ida grieving over the loss of my grandfather, poor child; she really seemed half broken-hearted."

"Yes, sir; they're uncommon tender in their feelings," said Jem sagely, with a mental reference to Cherry.

"Well, go on," said Mervyn, rousing himself. "She would not divulge their whereabouts?"

"Not she, sir. Stiff as a post about it, and bent on screening her husband. I think she had a notion something was wrong. I didn't ask her after the first, for I made up my mind it would be kinder to see for myself, and not make her risk his anger by telling, even if I could have got her to tell at all, which isn't certain by any manner of means. So I just went after her to the station, and travelled in the same train."

"And you found them out?"

"I saw her go into a cottage, sir, and then come to the window with her bonnet off."

"And she never saw you getting into the train or out?"

"Not she!" said Jem. "Backwoodsmen are not

so easy caught;" and he laughed, but added gravely, "I didn't like to have to do it. Seemed strange to be tracking my own mother home, unknown to her. But I might have brought her into trouble if I'd insisted on going with her openly."

"Possibly," was all Mervyn said.

"There wasn't much time for thought. Otherwise I don't know as I could have made up my mind to it," said Jem. "What do you think, sir?"

"I think it was needful in the cause of justice that Mr. Woollatt's abode should be discovered," replied Mervyn. "So you have done us good service."

"I know that," said Jem, with a touch of impatience. "But, Mr. Mervyn, you're not one who would say, 'Find it out by fair means or foul.' There's some things that strike a man differently after he's done them from what they did before. It seemed to me at the time that I was just doing the only thing I could do 'in the cause of justice,' as you say; but I'm not so sure now."

Mervyn looked at him silently for a moment.

"If you had been a detective——" he said.

"Ay, that would have made a difference. And you'd sooner I'd let her go?"

"On no account. It was of essential importance to find out Mr. Woollatt's address. Only I think in your case—well, honestly, Jem, I would rather have told her point-blank that I must and would know the truth, and that she should not leave the grounds until she yielded. A shout would have summoned

help in a moment. It would have been disagreeable, and she would have thought you very cruel, but I do think on the whole that I should have preferred such point-blank dealing. There! you asked me my opinion, and I have given it."

"And I'm not sure but it fits in with mine," said Jem gravely. "Only I was taken unawares, and didn't think of that plan. I'm not so ready at decision as you, sir."

"Well, now we have to consider what to do," said Mervyn thoughtfully. "I must go by the first train——"

"There's one in two hours from this time," said Jem.

"Good! For Mr. Marchmont's sake we must lose no time; but I shall not tell him where I am going. We shall want you to point out the cottage, and then you will have to keep out of sight until required. Mr. Terence must come too."

"Mr. Terence!" repeated Jem.

"Better have a lawyer at hand. My wish is to get a regular statement of facts drawn up by that man—if things be as we suppose."

"Do you really think he'll do it, sir?"

"Wait and you will see. We have no time for talk. Will you—— By-the-by, you are in want of food?"

"No, sir. I had a good breakfast. Better not delay for anything."

"Then I'm ready. A word to Miss Marchmont,

and I will join you in the hall. We must walk to Mr. Terence's, and drive thence to the station."

Thoroughly aroused from his depression, Mervyn strode vigorously out of the room; and coming across Mr. Marchmont on the stairs, informed the astonished clergyman of an unexpected business call.

"Now! At this time! But, Mervyn——"

"It can't be helped. No delay is possible," said Mervyn. "If I can be back to-night, I will; but don't be surprised if I stay longer away."

"I am glad to see you looking better," said Mr. Marchmont, in a perplexed tone. "But don't you think, my dear boy, that I had better take Ida to the Vicarage? She should not remain here without you."

"Thank you; the very thing that crossed my own mind. Addie will make her happier, and ——"

There was a suppressed sigh, as Mervyn hurried away.

CHAPTER XXV.

THINGS SEEM GETTING CLEAR.

"HA! there they come!"

Early tea was just over at the Vicarage, when, after a long day of expectation, a railway fly was seen driving through the garden. Mr. Marchmont and the two young ladies hastened to the front door, where Jem Collins was already standing. Mervyn sprang past him, with a somewhat agitated manner, and grasped the clergyman's hand.

"All is right at last. I have to congratulate you on being the lawful owner of the Towers!"

"Oh, it isn't surely true!" broke out Addie in dismay, while a look, half-grieved, half-bewildered, was on Mr. Marchmont's face.

"Mervyn, you are not well!" exclaimed Ida, as he gave his hand to Addie, and then turned again to her father, a damp paleness overspreading his face, which had glowed with excitement the moment before.

"Nothing much; I'm only done up. Jem ——"

He availed himself of Jem's offered arm, but the next moment rallied with a strong effort.

"You don't look half pleased enough," he said to Mr. Marchmont.

"My dear boy, you could have brought me no worse news. What have you been doing?"

"I'll tell you directly. Can't we sit down somewhere?"

"Come to the drawing-room," said Addie. "I'm so sorry the tea is cold, but some more shall be made directly."

"Thanks, no—I can't take anything. I am going on to the Towers in a few minutes," said Mervyn briefly, as he found his way into the depths of an arm-chair, with a sigh of weariness. Addie thought the tone cold, and wondered at it.

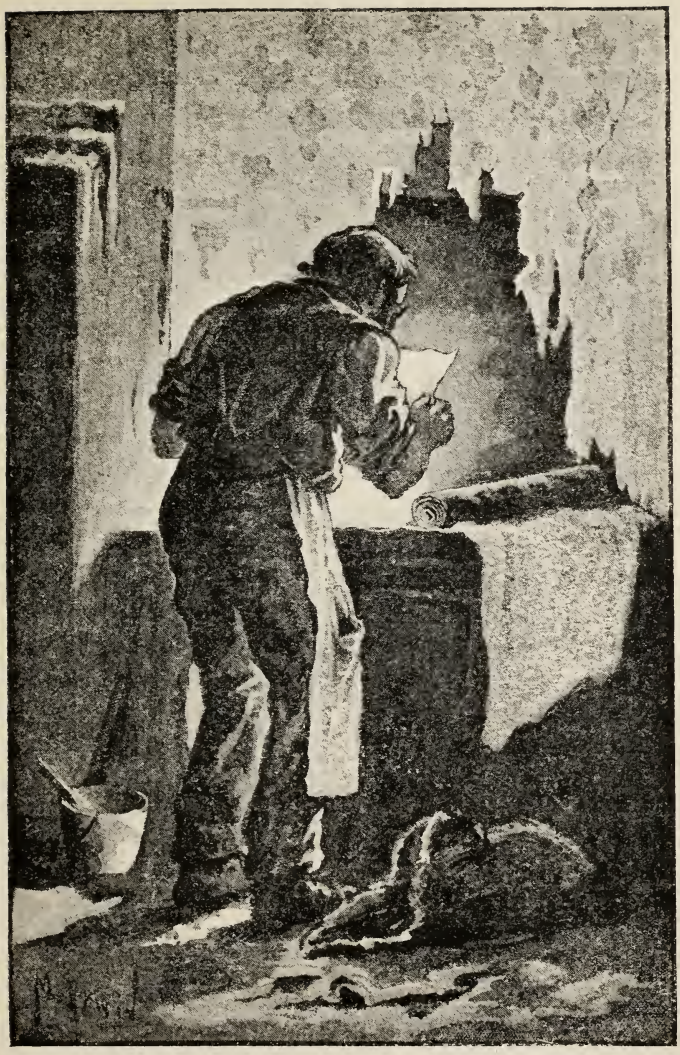
"Towers! Nonsense," said Mr. Marchmont. "You will sleep here to-night, and Jem too. I have sent away the fly. Why, you don't look fit to walk upstairs, much less to drive to the Towers."

"Mr. Marchmont, it is all true," said Mervyn.

"I wish it were not!" rejoined the clergyman sorrowfully.

"We found the man—Randall Woollatt—and made him sign a regular deposition—taken down from his lips, and duly witnessed. Mr. Terence was with me, so you can imagine nothing was wanting."

"Except the will itself," said Mr. Marchmont, with sudden hopefulness "Don't you tell me it was destroyed?"



He came upon a secret cupboard in the wall of the study —*p.* 195.

"That makes no difference. Well, I must tell you more, or you will never believe me—at least, till you have heard the deposition read."

"Where is it?" asked Ida.

"In Mr. Terence's keeping—until after the funeral. He will bring it forward then."

"What made you take him—or go at all?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"I can't tell you all now. Jem can explain particulars afterwards. He saw his mother, and found out her address somehow—without letting her know. Neither she nor Woollatt had the least expectation of a visit from us."

"Did you go there yesterday?" asked Ida.

"Not to the house. It occurred to us that Woollatt might not be yet at home, and that a call too early would frustrate our purpose, so we—or, at least, I—lay awake all night by way of preparation, and ——"

"My dear boy, no wonder you are tired," said Mr. Marchmont, with a gentle longing to get upon any other subject than that of the will.

"And then, directly after breakfast, Mr. Terence and I went to the house—Jem being near. I had my doubts whether Mrs. Woollatt might not recognise either or both of us at the first moment, and give her husband a timely warning. But though she looked hard at me, her memory was at fault. I must have changed more than Jem."

"And Mr. Woollatt?" said Addie.

"She seemed suspicious and unwilling to summon him; wanted to know our business; declared he was engaged, and pressed us to wait till another time. We insisted on seeing him immediately, however, and she called him. I don't suppose he had an idea of his secret becoming known, for he entered with the most confident air imaginable. Strange to say, though she had not recognised me, he did."

"Why, Mervyn, you never saw him before!" exclaimed Ida.

"Never; nor have I ever been counted like my grandfather—yet the moment he saw me, he said, 'Is it—is it—Mr. Stanhope?' And when I asked him how he knew, he said, 'By the likeness, sir, by the likeness. Wonderful likeness.' He asked after my grandfather, and grew thoughtful on hearing of his death.

"'Then you have come to me on business,' he said. 'I shall be happy to see you alone.' We protested, but he was resolute, and Mr. Terence gave way. 'I shall be at hand, Stanhope,' he said. 'If you want me, call me.'

"Well—it was a singular interview," said Mervyn, after a pause; "I can't tell all now. We came to the point very gradually—each showing caution. Woollatt soon saw that I had some knowledge of the will, and he evidently took it for granted that I had come to secure his continued secrecy. Once he said, in a puzzled tone, 'But why wish your friend to hear all this?' As, however, he did not press for an

answer, and asked no further questions about my motives, I did not feel bound to give him uncalled-for information. Step by step he gradually poured out the whole story; and then—well, it was about as much as I could do to keep my composure—looking at the twinkle in the fellow's eye, as he exulted in what he believed to be his power over me.

"It wasn't a long story, after all. His father was a carpenter in a rather small way, living in Ickledale, years upon years ago. One day when my grandfather was a man in the prime of life, this Woollatt—the father—was called in to execute some repairs and alterations at the Towers. While so doing, he came upon a secret cupboard in the wall of the study, entirely concealed by the paper which he had to tear down for his work. You know the study is the only room that ever has been papered. Within this place was a small shelf, and on it lay a roll of paper, which Woollatt opened. He found that it purported to be the will of the last owner of the Towers, and, being a shrewd man, he guessed by the date that it might be of considerable importance—all the more so, as, on glancing through it, he found that the estate was willed absolutely to you, Mr. Marchmont, and merely a legacy was left to my grandfather.

"Woollatt quietly made himself master of the contents, and was discovered by my grandfather in the act of doing so. He cared nothing whatever for his anger, feeling that he now held him completely in his power. It was a great shock to my grandfather,

and the two held a long consultation. The will was properly witnessed, but the two witnesses were old servants, who, rather remarkably, were at that time both dead. Probably they had not understood what they were doing, or which will they were signing, as they seem never to have mentioned it. Why the poor old gentleman had hidden it so oddly away no one can imagine now, but there it was.

"I wonder whether my grandfather would have done the evil deed, but for the tempter at his side. Woollatt offered to keep his secret—for a consideration, of course—and the will was destroyed before they left the room.

"From time to time, so far as I can gather, the elder Woollatt made fresh appeals to my grandfather, and not in vain. As old age grew upon him he took to drinking, and one day, when not quite himself, he told all this to his son, the present Woollatt. On coming to his senses he tried to deny the tale, but Randall Woollatt was too sharp for him.

"The old father died at last, not many years ago, and my grandfather no doubt felt more free in a sense than he had done for years. For a time Randall Woollatt, having plenty to live upon, did not trouble him. At length he ran through his money, and made his way to Ickledale."

"Yes, but he was here before that," said Ida. "The last time his father came, Randall Woollatt came to the Towers with him. That was how grandfather and I recognised his face at the time he was

staying in Ickledale and married Mrs. Collins. And you are passing over the letter he wrote."

"I am confused," said Mervyn. "Yes, the letter—the one which Ida saw—was the first he wrote to let my grandfather know that he was in possession of the secret. This was how details were so far given, instead of mere allusions. My grandfather tried to put him off, saying he had not seen the will, and could give no real proofs, which I imagine was true enough. However, he claimed and obtained a small sum, and a year or two after came in person to Ickledale. You know what happened then. Whether he really fell in love with Mrs. Collins, whether he married her to give colour to his presence in the place, or to pass his time, I really could not make out. At all events, his selling of the cottage was a mere farce, to veil the very large sum which he wrung from my grandfather by working on his fears."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE MONEY AND BURDEN."

"WHAT did you say to the man when you heard all this?" asked Addie, when Mervyn had arrived at this point in his story.

"I hardly know. The difficulty was to restrain my indignation. Yet when he understood the truth of my motives in asking him, there was something almost ludicrous—only it was grievous too—in his bewilderment. 'Give up!' he said. 'Give it all up! What! when nothing can be proved! Give up such a possession! And for what on earth?'

"'For conscience' sake!' I answered. And—I couldn't help it, Mr. Marchmont; I'm young in the service of God, and have not much right perhaps to speak out yet; but I could not help saying, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' And I added, 'Not the

Towers of Ickledale, Mr. Woollatt! They are not worth it! Better be free in heart and penniless in pocket!'

"Mr. Woollatt thought me mad, and told me so, which didn't much matter. I warned him in plain terms about the evil of the course he was pursuing, and while I spoke it seemed suddenly to dawn upon him that he had placed himself in an exceedingly awkward position. I noticed a restless look come into his face, and saw him looking in an uneasy way at the door, as if meditating flight. He broke into my words with the question, 'What—what are you going to do, Mr. Stanhope?'

"'Restore the property at once to its lawful owners,' I said. 'As for your part in the affair, you know as well as I do what you deserve. But your wife is the mother of my faithful Collins. Whether it is weakness or no on my part, I certainly do shrink from proceeding to extremities against you. The choice must be your own, however.'

"'What choice?' he asked, in a tremor of fear which I had not expected from one so hardened in evil. But I suppose guilt and cowardice go hand-in-hand.

"'Just this,' I said: 'either you make now upon this spot your solemn deposition to the truth of all this—that is, you write or dictate the facts, signed by yourself, and witnessed by my friend and me—or we make an immediate appeal to the law on behalf of Mr. Marchmont.'

"I hardly expected him to give way at once, but he did; having apparently a very wholesome dread of the law. Mr. Terence came in at my call, and we had a hard hour's work. When we came to the end, Mr. Terence gave him his mind upon the matter. Woollatt listened sullenly. All he wanted was, evidently, to get rid of us.

"'It wasn't *my* doing,' he said once. '*I* didn't destroy the will.'"

"He connived at the sin, though," said Addie, indignantly. "What a man he must be! Do you think it is right to let him off?"

"I was pretty sure Mr. Marchmont would never prosecute him; and the matter of the will once proved, it is simply out of my power to do so, since I am but a homeless wanderer," said Mervyn, in the same languid tone which he had before addressed to Addie. She shrank under it.

"And you promised him immunity?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"I could promise nothing for you. I warned him that he was of course liable for the sum which he had wrung from my grandfather, since he had, in effect, robbed you of it. The written deposition was simply the condition of no immediate steps on my part. I had him in my power then. He knew, and I knew, that he would have opportunities of escape before any steps could possibly be taken by you. I believe, in fact, that it would be your wish."

"I!" said Mr. Marchmont, "I could not prosecute

any one, Mervyn—least of all if he had only injured me. How could I? But I should like to see him—to speak to him——"

"He is probably far enough away now," said Mervyn. "When Mr. Terence and I had obtained all we needed, in the way of information and document, we left the house, and Collins went in. He was rather afraid for his mother, I believe. But, happily, Woollatt seems never to have suspected her. He took it for granted that we had made discoveries about him, by examination of my grandfather's letters after his death. He asked her once if she had told us his address; but she could truly affirm that she had not, and he believed her."

"I suppose the condition on which poor grandfather gave him so much for his cottage was that he should keep clear of Ickledale," said Ida.

"Yes; I thought I told you that. The condition, and the solemn promise on Woollatt's part, was that nobody in Ickledale should thenceforth even know where he and his wife were living. That explains their secret flight."

"And what will become of Mrs. Woollatt?" asked Addie.

"That was the question. Mr. Terence and I walked up and down for an hour, waiting for Jem, and wondering what he was after. Poor fellow! he had a trying scene with his mother, and came out a good deal moved. He asked her outright, it seems,

after some sorrowful discussion, whether Woollatt was really kind to her; whether it mightn't even be better, if Woollatt were going away, that she should come to Ickledale. But her devotion was touching, poor thing! She went and took his arm, and said, 'No, I won't leave him. I'll hold to him still.' And at last she told Jem to go, and then gave him a tender good-bye, and promised that perhaps some day she would write. Poor thing! she has chosen her own road wilfully, as so many of us do, and now——"

Mervyn broke off with a deep sigh, which received a yet deeper echo from beside him.

"Mr. Marchmont, you should not sigh."

"It is a grievous story from first to last," said Mr. Marchmont. "And the money is a burden to me. What am I to do with it all?"

"Just what you once told me to do."

"Eh? What was that?"

"Give it all to God."

"Just so. Yes; I'm thankful to know that. I'm thankful to know that I have such an alleviation," said the old clergyman, as if he had been speaking of some great sorrow. "But the responsibility will be a heavy cross. Mervyn, my dear boy, you are worn out."

"I am, rather. Would you let me say good-night?" he asked, standing up with some difficulty. "Collins will give me his arm upstairs. He is outside, I believe."

"Good-night; and mind you get a long rest," said Mr. Marchmont, shaking hands warmly.

"Addie," he said abruptly, as the door closed behind Mervyn's unsteady steps, "that's one of the finest fellows I ever saw!"

Addie looked up sorrowfully.

"Oh, if only it were not true!"

"He is a fine fellow—spending all this time and energy to prove himself penniless, just for the sake of truth and justice."

"But perhaps he really likes to be free to return to Australia, papa."

"Eh? Do you think so?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALL IS NOT YET SETTLED.

THE funeral was over, and a fortnight following had passed away. Mervyn did not fail to be present at the ceremony, and he persisted in coming downstairs for a portion of each day afterwards; but the reaction of over-excitement was still upon him, and a slight intermittent fever seemed to bear away all his strength. A grave reserve had taken the place of his usual frankness, and he rather repelled than invited conversation.

Mr. Marchmont watched him anxiously, debating with himself how best to bring about a different state of affairs. He felt burdened with his own new weight of responsibility, and was grieved to see a shadow upon his Addie's face. Once or twice he tried to get upon the subject of Mervyn's future when alone with him; but Mervyn turned the matter aside with a hasty allusion to Australia, and his quickening pulse warned Mr. Marchmont to desist.

"How is your master to-day, Collins?" he asked one afternoon, meeting Jem on the stairs.

"He don't get on, sir," said Jem. "I 'm not sure as he will till he gets a change."

"A change——"

Jem did not explain. "Mr. Mervyn would be glad to speak to you, I believe, sir," was all he said.

"Now?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"He says so, sir," Jem answered dubiously; "but the doctor said this morning he wasn't to talk."

"You've seen him like this before, have you not, Jem?"

Jem's face clouded. "Yes, I have, sir."

"How long did it last?"

"It didn't stay like this. He got worse and worse —for weeks. I never thought he'd have pulled through."

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" said Mr. Marchmont.

"It was worry then, and it 's worry now," said Jem.

"Yes," said Mr. Marchmont dreamily. "The doctor says it is no doubt something pressing on his mind."

Jem was silent.

"Well, I mustn't delay," said Mr. Marchmont; and he went upstairs and tapped at the door of Mervyn's bedroom. Failing, after some perseverance, to obtain an answer, he moved to the door of the small adjoining sitting-room, which had been also placed at Mervyn's disposal, and was immediately bidden to "Come in."

"My dear boy! Up and dressed!"

If "up" in one sense, Mervyn was certainly not so in another. He was lying on the sofa, dressed indeed, but with rumpled hair, heavy eyes, and flushed cheeks, the very picture of feverish exhaustion.

"I wanted to see what I could do."

"Collins did not tell me I should find you here," said Mr. Marchmont. "Mervyn, you are imprudent —with this pulse——"

"I shall never be better till I am off; I wish something could be settled."

Mr. Marchmont drew a chair to his side and sat down. "What do you want to be settled?"

"Jem and Cherry have to be married. Old Mrs. Towers must be brought to a point. And then the sooner we are gone the better."

"What are they going to marry upon?"

"That's it! Mrs. Towers wants Jem to go out and make a fortune, and come back for Cherry. Sooner than that I would go alone, and insist on his remaining in England."

"Why should you go to Australia at all?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"I have made up my mind."

"At all events, you are in no state for travelling at present. You must give up all thoughts of it; indeed you must. You would be wilfully throwing away your life. I could not in conscience let you go."

"You don't know," muttered Mervyn, restlessly

changing his position. "You don't know. I ought to be gone."

"Why ought?"

"I ought—I must."

"My dear boy, your first duty is to get well."

"I can't remain in the way of temptation." A sudden flush mounted to his temples. "I did not mean to say that. I beg your pardon. I hardly know what I am talking about."

"What temptation?"

No answer came. Mervyn pressed his face into the sofa-cushions. His old friend waited patiently.

"Mr. Marchmont——"

"Well?" said Mr. Marchmont cheerily, hoping something was coming at last.

"I have been thinking how to ask a favour of you."

"No favour that you could ask would be too great for me to grant."

"About the voyage," said Mervyn. "My idea was that Jem and I could work our voyage out, and get together enough somehow to take Cherry comfortably, but——"

"Nonsense, Mervyn, nonsense! Nonsense!" said the old clergyman huskily.

"I'm not strong enough for that now, and I don't get back strength quickly. So I shall have to beg a loan of you, I am afraid—pocketing my pride——"

"There can be no talk of loans. Nonsense, my dear fellow! If you go, you will go in comfort. I couldn't consent to anything else, possibly. Work

your way out indeed! I'll see about that. But you are not going yet. I want to keep you in England."

"And I can't stay."

Mr. Marchmont rose from his seat, and took one or two turns up and down the room.

"Do you know I was thinking something very singular last night," he said.

"Were you?"

"Yes. What if the whole of this were a mistake from first to last?"

"I don't understand."

"Why, it is a great deal to rest upon the testimony of one unprincipled man. Suppose, after all, that the whole story is a get-up—a make-believe! Supposing there never was such a will in reality! Why then the Towers is lawfully yours still. I positively shrink from possessing the place with no stronger claim. The tale may be an invention from beginning to end."

Mr. Marchmont spoke eagerly, warming with his own idea as he proceeded.

"Impossible," Mervyn answered. "No imaginary tale could have given the two Woollatts such power over my grandfather."

Mr. Marchmont looked grievously disappointed, and then brightened up.

"But, my dear Mervyn, though the fact of their power can't well be contested, the degree and the cause of it rest simply upon that man's authority. It may arise from some entirely different foundation."

"Woollatt was not likely to invent such a tale gratuitously," said Mervyn, with almost a smile, as he glanced up at the simple-hearted old man. "You won't be able to make it out, though I'm not equal to an argument to-day. Let the matter rest now."

"You don't know, though, and I don't know, and nobody ever will know, the rights of the question," said Mr. Marchmont triumphantly. "I grant that the man seems to speak the truth, but——"

"Witness, the little cupboard in the wall seen with our own eyes," murmured Mervyn.

"But we don't positively know the truth. I don't feel that the Towers is truly mine, and you don't feel that it is yours. So what's to be done? I declare it almost seems as if you and my Addie stood in the position of equal claimants—something like the rival houses of York and Lancaster. Well, well, well! that matter found satisfactory settlement at last," said Mr. Marchmont.

Mervyn evidently read the thought which lay below the words. Again a deep flush rose to his brow, making the pulse to throb with overpowering violence.

"My dear boy—I beg your pardon—I am very foolish—you will pay for this!" said Mr. Marchmont anxiously. "But I can't help thinking, if we could just get things straight, you would be better. Shall I call Jem—or——?"

"No, it will pass," said Mervyn with difficulty. "Wait, please."

Ten minutes went by in silence, and Mr. Marchmont ventured to ask, "Are you better yet?"

A gesture answered him.

"Then there's something I want to say to you. I don't quite know how to say it, but you will forgive me if I am mistaken."

The flush deepened, and the pulsation came with renewed force. Mervyn raised himself to a sitting posture.

"This will never do," he said resolutely. "I did not know I was so foolish. Now, Mr. Marchmont, I will listen."

Mr. Marchmont mused for a moment.

"I am afraid of your going off to Australia under a delusion," he said. "Mervyn, you are very honourable, very sensitive, and a little proud. Putting these together, and noting a certain change in your manner, I can't help coming to a certain conclusion."

"Change?" repeated Mervyn.

"Yes; pardon me if I am wrong. I have had an impression that your affections were set upon my child."

Mervyn laid his arm upon the sofa-back and rested his forehead against it.

"The whole may be fancy—an old man's foolish dream. You won't mind my having said the words if it is so. Perhaps, after all, you are both indifferent to one another."

For a moment Mervyn's head swam wildly; then he spoke:—

"The dream was mine, when I did not know that I was penniless. I have no right now to indulge in any such hopes."

"Is that all?" asked Mr. Marchmont.

"I have no right. You must not tempt me."

"Tempt, indeed! As if I wanted my Addie to be a prey to some wretched fortune-seeker."

"She has too much sense——"

"Have you a right to draw back, for no better reason?"

"I never sought her—consciously. I did not know my own feelings—till—till all this came out——"

"Yes, and you have taken care since. But I saw it long before. How do you know what impression you may have made upon my child's heart—unconsciously even to her? I beseech you not to let pride stand in the way of her happiness."

"I would not—if I thought—— Is it your wish?" muttered Mervyn.

"The very desire of my heart—since I have believed that you and she would verily live for God together, and not for this life."

Mervyn silently grasped his hand, unable to speak, and Mr. Marchmont became alarmed.

"I think you should not talk any more now, my dear boy."

"One word. I did mean to come back some day from Australia—if she—if she remained free——"

"What! with another fortune!" Mr. Marchmont groaned. "One is enough. And your right is almost

as clear to it as hers—to my mind. You don't know what an intense relief it will be to me, my dear boy —if—if it comes to pass——"

"If!" repeated Mervyn faintly. "You don't know what it has been to me to give her up."

"I don't *think* you need be very anxious," Mr. Marchmont could not resist saying. "I have noticed a little on both sides, you know. I only wish it were possible for you to have a word with her——"

"Now? Oh no!"

Mervyn was lying back exhausted. "No, you are not fit for it,' said Mr. Marchmont.

"Not only that," whispered Mervyn. "There is just the doubt——"

"What doubt?"

"I may not get through this."

"My dear boy!" said Mr. Marchmont earnestly.

"I know. You have not seen me so before. I'm not at the worse yet."

"But you are going to be better now," said the old clergyman cheerfully. "The idea of your dressing and talking of Australia! I shall call Collins to put you back into bed."

Then came a rap at the door, and Jem entered with the doctor. Mr. Marchmont made his way into the passage, and there was joined presently by the latter individual.

"What is the cause of this change, Mr. Marchmont? His pulse is fearfully high."

"I'm afraid I haven't been very prudent, but you

said something on his mind was keeping him back. I have set that right. Do you not think he will improve now?"

"Set that right and set him wrong," muttered the doctor. "Kill or cure, I suppose. I hope it won't be the former."

"You don't think the end to be gained was worth the temporary excitement!"

"I hope so—I hope so," said the doctor dubiously. "The thing is done now, but I wish you had asked me first. There mustn't be another allusion made in his hearing to any subject which could possibly excite him, without my permission. Check him, if he begins, or I won't answer for the consequences."

Mr. Marchmont was disappointed, but promised compliance.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SOMEBODY HAS HIS WISH—OR HERS!

THREE months passed away, and Mervyn was struggling back to health from a long and desperate illness. He had received the tenderest care and the most devoted attention from Ida and Jem, to say nothing of others in the household. But the doctor now fully believed, and frankly avowed, that but for the lightening of the weight on his mind in that seemingly imprudent interview last related, Mervyn might never have returned from the depths of the valley where for weeks he had lain.

Mr. Marchmont had kept his own counsel so far; but at that point he could not resist telling Addie what the doctor had said, which necessitated a few words of careful and vague explanation as to the manner of the interview. Whereupon Addie threw herself into her father's arms, and cried most bitterly, with a mingling of sorrow and joy which the loving-

hearted old man well understood. He had shed tears himself on first hearing that Mervyn was at last fully out of danger.

But so far as Mervyn was concerned, his lips were still closed by his promise to the doctor.

One day Ida sat watchfully by her brother's side, keeping guard over his comfort. He had been lifted to the sofa that afternoon, and was lying very contentedly, with the firelight shining on the wasted fingers which were sheltering his eyes. Ida's needle went softly to and fro, and presently she looked up to find him gazing at her.

"Does it tire you to see me working?"

"Not in the least. I have been going over various matters——"

"Don't yet. You will tire yourself."

"No, I am stronger to-day. Where have you put my little Testament — mother's?" he added softly.

"Safely away. Do you want it?"

"Yes, dear."

Ida brought it to him, and looked furtively in another direction as he pressed it to his lips.

"After all, *this* is the real gold. I wish I could read."

He opened it for a moment, in spite of her remonstrance.

"No use yet. My head won't stand it."

He lay musing again, with the small volume clasped tightly in one of his hands.

"Ida, I caught a glimpse of the writing on the title-page—my mother's text. It has brought back that talk of ours one day; do you remember?"

"Yes, Mervyn, dear—don't excite yourself."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, but his eyes were sparkling.

"How little you or I knew of rest then—the rest of pardon, peace, patience! I'm glad I have had this illness. What a difference!"

"A difference in what?"

"Between this and former illnesses. Why, Ida, I did not know my Saviour then."

And he said no more; but a happy smile gleamed in his eyes and round his mouth. Ida felt that though she, too, knew somewhat of that "rest of the soul," she knew not so much as this, and she resolved to seek it more earnestly.

Not many days later Mervyn was allowed, for the first time, to dress himself and move—or, more correctly, to be dressed and moved—into the little adjoining sitting-room. Mr. Marchmont also obtained a somewhat reluctant consent from the doctor to a much-desired motion on his own part.

"Well, Mervyn, this is something like recovery," he said, finding his way to the couch.

Mervyn smiled assent, though feeling extremely unlike it at that moment.

"Collins, you can go downstairs for half an hour; and Ida, my dear, run into the garden."

Jem guessed the truth and vanished. Ida pro-

tested; but, to her surprise, Mervyn said, "Yes, go, dear."

And when the room was cleared, he began the business himself by an appealing—"Have I waited long enough?"

"My dear boy, you have been wonderfully patient; you have indeed."

"Don't praise me. I have had some severe lessons against my old wilfulness. But I want to ask you something. Did you mean all you said that night? I remember your words, but they come back to me in a maze of confusion, and I can scarcely disentangle fancy from fact."

Mr. Marchmont laid his hand steadily across Mervyn's forehead, where a flush was perceptible.

"This won't do," he said. "Can you be calm, my dear boy?"

"I 'll try. I ought to be able."

He closed his eyes, and lay perfectly still for a few minutes, neither of them speaking.

"Now," he said, looking up with a half smile, "I don't think you need be afraid for me."

"Then—I meant every word. You have my fullest, most hearty consent."

Mervyn wrung his hand, with a muttered "Thank you"—adding, "You are sure it is right, knowing our respective positions?"

"We settled all that."

"Then—when may I see her?"

"I 'll fetch her if you like?"

"Now!"

"Now. I shall just tell her to come and amuse you for half an hour. You needn't enter on any agitating subjects, you know. I 'll tell Addie—or at least she 's aware—that if she consents to come, it—it—just implies something, you know," said the eager old man, stumbling over his words. "So you will not be in suspense—only don't excite yourself."

Mr. Marchmont disappeared, and presently Addie appeared in his stead. Half an hour later Mr. Marchmont came back with Ida, and Addie immediately fled.

"Eh! what 's this?" said Mr. Marchmont. "I thought I forbad agitation. You are about done for now, I think!"

"I 'll rest. Mr. Marchmont, I can hardly believe my own happiness."

"And you did speak——"

"I couldn't help it—I 'm an invalid, you know," said Mervyn, with a smile, half mischievous, and wholly joyous.

"And she 'll have you!"

"She doesn't mind my being a penniless adventurer; so I have promised not to mind her wealth."

"Hush; not another word now. Go to sleep."

Mervyn closed his eyes and went off like a child, thoroughly worn out. But when he woke up, after nours of deep repose, he felt almost vigorous, and exclaimed aloud at the sight of Ida.

"Rested, Mervyn?"

"I think I am—just!" he answered, in his old sunny fashion.

"And is it really true?"

"Why! Are you sorry?"

"Sorry! Why, it is my greatest wish. But I thought——"

"Thought she wasn't my model. No, but she went beyond it. I'm very, very thankful."

"So am I," said Mr. Marchmont, coming up behind. "For Mervyn and Addie will live at the Towers, and look after all that money, and I shall stay here among my dear people, and see you both constantly. And when Addie goes, I shouldn't wonder if Ida would come and take care of a lonely old man—eh, my dear?"

"I should love it dearly," whispered Ida.

"And Addie and I will spare her to you, though to nobody else," said Mervyn. "Yes, it does sound happy, doesn't it?"

"May God's blessing be on us all!" said the good old clergyman reverently. "And then we shall be happy, indeed."

Three months later a double wedding took place in the old church. Widow Towers was the only person present, except the pew-opener, who thought it needful to shed tears. She was slightly aggrieved to think that Jem and Cherry's home would be at the Towers, while she must still reside in her little cottage. But a small annuity settled upon her proved consoling, and after all she was much more proud of

Cherry's prospective position, as housekeeper at the Towers, than distressed at her own disappointment.

It would be hard to say which of the brides looked prettiest—Adela Marchmont in her sweet fair serenity, or little Cherry Towers in her rosy bloom. The bridegrooms made a stronger contrast; for Jem's healthy vigour had never been more apparent, while Mervyn still looked slight and pale. What of that? His face fairly sparkled with its smile of calm happiness, outward and inward. Mervyn Stanhope was certainly not the same man in all respects that he had been a year before.

A great crowd had gathered in the churchyard to see them appear after the ceremony. And when Mervyn came down the steps, with the much-loved "Miss Addie" leaning on his arm, a hearty and prolonged cheer rang through the air. Mervyn raised his hat and bowed repeatedly, while Addie smiled all round her. Suddenly he paused, turned half back towards Jem, who was modestly following in his rear with the blushing Cherry, and said distinctly enough for all to hear—

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